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Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Firestar-handsome ginger tom
Apprentice, Bramblepaw

Deputy: Graystripe-long-haired gray tom

Medicine cat: Waterlily-pretty calico long-haired she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors: Longtail-pale tabby tom, dark black stripes
Apprentice, Fernpaw

Mousefur-small dusky-brown she-cat

Brackenfur-golden-brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Tawnypaw

Dustpelt-dark brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Ashpaw

Sandstorm-pale ginger she-cat

Frostfur-beautiful white she-cat, blue eyes

Cloudtail-long-haired white tom

Cinderpelt-dark gray she-cat

Brightheart-white she-cat, ginger splotches

Thornclaw-golden-brown tabby tom

Apprentices: Fernpaw-pale gray with darker flecks, she-cat, pale green eyes

Ashpaw-pale gray with darker flecks, tom, dark blue eyes

Bramblepaw-dark brown tabby tom, amber eyes

Tawnypaw-tortoiseshell she-cat, green eyes

Queens: Goldenflower-pale ginger coat, the oldest nursery queen

Elders: One-eye-pale gray she-cat, the oldest she-cat in ThunderClan, virtually blind and deaf

Smallear-gray tom with very small ears, the oldest tom in ThunderClan

Dappletail-once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat, lovely dappled coat

Speckletail-pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Tigerstar-big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws.

Deputy: Blackfoot-large white tom with huge jet-black paws.

Medicine cat: Littlecloud-very small tabby tom

WINDCLAN

Leader: Tallstar-black-and-white tom, very long tail

Deputy: Onewhisker-brown tabby tom

Medicine cat: Barkface-short-tailed brown tom

Warriors: Mudclaw-mottled dark brown tom

Queens: Ashfoot-gray she-cat

Morningflower-tortoiseshell she-cat

Whitetail-small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Leopardstar-unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Hawkpaw

Deputy: Stonefur-gray tom, battle-scarred ears

Medicine cat: Mudfur-long-haired light brown tom

Warriors: Blackclaw-smoky black tom

Heavystep-thickset tabby tom

Stormfur-large, muscular, long-haired dark gray tom with amber eyes

Dawnflower-pale gray she-cat

Shadepelt-very dark gray she-cat

Mistyfoot-dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Mothpaw

Feathertail-light gray she-cat with blue eyes

Loudbelly-dark brown tom

Willowbreeze-solid gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Apprentices: Hawkpaw-dark brown tabby tom with a snow-white underbelly and ice-blue eyes

Mothpaw-dappled golden tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Queens: Mosspelt-tortoiseshell she-cat

BLOODCLAN

Scourge-black tom with one white paw

Shadowheart-solid black medium-haired tom with green eyes

Bone-massive, muscular, black-and-white tom with green eyes, long legs, and a battle-scarred pelt

LONERS

Whisper-medium-haired tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Cookie-scrawny black-and-white tom with a battle-scarred muzzle and tip of ear, green eyes

Ginger-solid pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Prologue

Waterlily's heart beated a little faster as she stepped in line with her ThunderClan clanmates, the rhythmic sound of their padding paws resonating through the forest. The familiar scent of the woodland surrounded her, blending with the earthy fragrance of the other Clans as they congregated for the Gathering. Her keen gaze swept over the assembled cats. She spotted her usual spot with the medicine cats and made her way down the hill and to her old friends. She sat next to Mudfur and greeted him with a slight nod.

"How has ThunderClan been?" He meowed with a slight rasp.

"Well, we have a lot going on." Waterlily spoke carefully. "I can explain it after the Gathering." She mewed as she glanced over at the high branches.

In the soft glow of moonlight filtering through the canopy, Firestar's distinctive ginger pelt caught her eye, his authoritative presence commanding the attention of the gathering cats. "Let the meeting begin." He glanced over at Tigerstar and kept his green gaze on Tigerstar's amber eyes. Tigerstar dipped his head, letting the ginger tom to go first.

"Whitestorm is dead." He began.

Gasps of shock rippled through the Clans, while ThunderClan sat with their heads hung low. Firestar then continued. "But he was murdered."

Horror shot through the crowd of cats. Mutters of disbelief whispered in a few different directions. Waterlily kept silent and flicked her tail nervously as she listened to what Firestar would say next.

"We have found out that Shadowheart is to blame. I have banished him. He is now a rogue and to never return. He is dangerous." He finished.

Waterlily looked down at her paws and closed her eyes tightly for a few moments, then opened them as she glanced around at the other cats. As the tension in the clearing lingered, some cats exchanged troubled glances, their expressions a mix of concern and uncertainty. Waterlily could sense the unease that had taken hold, each cat struggling with the news of Shadowheart's banishment.

"Graystripe is my deputy now." Firestar finished with a rasp.

"Graystripe, Graystripe!" Yowled the Clans.

Graystripe sat with his head held high, but Waterlily could see that he was still struggling to accept Whitestorm's death. Firestar then dipped his head to the next leader and took a step back. Tigerstar took a step forward and began to speak with pride. "Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw. Where are they?" He hissed, turning to Firestar.

Firestar kept his angry gaze, making sure to not show any signs of weakness, "They will be staying here. They were born here and will be raised here."

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes flexed out his huge talons. "I gave you clear warning." He growled, and raised his neck fur.

Firestar stood his ground and narrowed his eyes as well. "I know," He growled in return, "and I've made my decision."

Waterlily watched as the two leaders bristled their back fur and glare at one another. She was ready to step in in case a fight broke out at the truce of the Gathering, but Leopardstar stepped in between them. "We cannot fight." She hissed, looking at both leaders briefly. "We cannot afford to spill blood at a truce, especially during leaf-bare." She then glared at Tigerstar.

Tigerstar flattened his ears and looked away, knowing she was right. "When it is new-leaf, I expect them to switch Clans. If you still refuse by then, I will claw you to shreds." He threatened.

Waterlily kept her gaze on Firestar to see if he would say something in return, but he just dipped his head in acceptance. Waterlily bristled her fur in anger. Why wouldn't he say anything? But then a

thought terrified her even more. Perhaps that's what Firestar wants Tigerstar to think.

Leopardstar puffed out her chest and she began to speak with pride. "We have two new apprentices, Mothpaw and Hawkpaw"

"Mothpaw, Hawkpaw!" The shouts of cats rippled through the crowd, RiverClan being the loudest. Mothpaw puffed out her chest and sat straighter as she heard her name being called.

Leopardstar then silenced the cats with a wave of her tail. "Prey is scarce, but with new-leaf on the way soon, the river will thaw and we will have our fish back." She dipped her head to Tallstar. The tom rose to his paws, his long limbs stretching almost as tall as Tigerstar that sat beside him.

"We scented ShadowClan in our territory." He began with a furious hiss. "You do not have our permission to hunt on our lands."

ShadowClan looked at one another as if they were trying to see if anyone would deny or speak up about the accusation, but everyone was silent.

Tigerstar rose to his paws. He tried to look taller, but didn't match the depth of Tallstar, though Tigerstar could clearly win in this battle. "I will not sit here and let you accuse me of stealing prey. I have asked you to stand with me as one, but you have refused."

Firestar then rose to his paws as well. "We will draw this Gathering to a close." Then he jumped down with ease. He flicked his tail to ThunderClan and he led them a few fox-lengths away from the crowd of cats. Tigerstar reluctantly hopped down and led his Clan up the hill and back to ShadowClan camp. Leopardstar followed. Tallstar was the last to jump down, and Firestar padded up to him, slowly.

"We must form an alliance." He whispered, hoping Tigerstar, nor Leopardstar heard him.

Tallstar raised his head in confusion. "I will not be like Tigerstar and..."

Firestar raised his tail to interrupt him. "I do not wish to form the same kind of alliance like Tigerstar," He corrected him, "I want to fight against him. I think if we come together, we will be stronger."

Tallstar sat down and thought for a while before finally dipping his head. "Alright. Meet me here at claw-moon."

Firestar nodded in agreement and the two leaders dispersed. Waterlily longed to talk to her medicine cat friends, but the meeting drew to a close so fast, she had no time to explain anything about Shadowheart and his treacheries. She would have to wait till the half-moon to tell them and she feared that he might try to join another Clan by then.

Chapter One

Willowbreeze stood at top of the gorge, looking out. The scent of new-leaf filled her nostrils and she took a deep breath. Her heart laid heavy when she heard the news about Shadowheart. She didn't want to believe Firestar, but she had no choice. She felt as if though a dark cloud had casted over her. Rain began to pour down and her fur clung to her, revealing only her skinny and frail body.

"Come out of the rain." Meowed a familiar voice.

Willowbreeze turned and purred as Stormfur padded up behind her. "We are RiverClan cats. A little water won't hurt me."

Stormfur rested his tail on her shoulder, "At least come back to camp, then. Being out here by the gorge can be dangerous."

WIllowbreeze sighed then agreed, and followed him. The tall grass was drenched with water, and made bits and pieces cling to their bodies and as they made their way to camp. Stormfur padded beside her, making sure she was steady on her feet the whole way. Willowbreeze purred with thanks and let him fuss over her weakness for once. The rain persisted, relentless in its downpour as the two cats forged their path back to the safety of RiverClan camp.

As they drew closer to camp, a faint outline of the familiar bramble entrance came into view. Stormfur let Willowbreeze duck in first, then he followed after her. Her body drenched from the rain made her feel heavy. She heaved herself over a fallen tree trunk and then she veered towards the warriors' den. "Do you really believe that Shadowheart is a killer?" She mewed as Stormfur shook out water droplets from his pelt inside the warm and dry den.

"Well, yeah. Whitestorm is dead, isn't he?" He retorted.

Willowbreeze shrugged her shoulders. "I believe so, but Shadowheart is kind-hearted. He wouldn't kill another cat." She argued, shaking out her pelt once he was finished. She felt lighter

on her feet once more and she padded over to her nest. Some water droplets still clung to her fur, but then fell onto the moss she was about to lay down on. She kneaded the moss, then tucked in her paws as she laid down.

"How do you know that?" Stormfur sat a tail-length beside her and crossed one paw over the other just as he settled into his nest.

"Well...I." She paused, not really wanting to tell her friend about the tom she had been seeing, but she guessed that he would have found out sooner or later. "I was meeting up with him for moons down by Sunningrocks." She glanced over at the entrance, hoping no other warriors were within earshot of them.

"Willowbreeze, you know that's against the warrior code." He quickly growled.

Willowbreeze narrowed her eyes, "Do you think I don't know that?" She hissed. "I didn't expect this to happen."

"Well it's probably for the better then." He meowed more subtly.

Willowbreeze could feel her body boiling up with anger. *How could he just say that?* He acted as if love was something you could choose. "I hate the warrior code." She muttered under her breath.

Stormfur blinked in confusion, then rolled his eyes. "You'll be okay." Then he rested his chin on his crossed paw and closed his eyes.

Willowbreeze let her anger boil out and she closed her eyes tightly before she said something stupid. She let Stormfur's soft breathing calm her down and then she reopened them. The rain had stopped and the snow that was left from leaf-bare was finally gone. She gently scrambled to her feet, and quietly padded out of the den. If not even Stormfur believed her that Shadowheart was innocent, she would make them believe herself.

Once she got out of camp, she raced down to the gorge and over to the bridge that bound the two seperate cliffs together. She crossed over and snuck her way to Fourtrees, knowing no one would find her there.

She collected herself, letting her body rest as she made it to the familiar surroundings of the gathering place. She looked around, and lifted her muzzle, opening her jaws occasionally to see if she could smell or taste Shadowheart's faint scent. Nothing. His scent was gone. Not even a gust of wind could help her now.

She frantically trekked around the island, hoping for something or a sign on where she should start. Finally she just chose a direction after going in circles for what seemed like hours. She made her way to a thunderpath and she flattened her ears.

A foul stench filled her nostrils as she scrunched her muzzle and her eyes began to slightly water from the fumes that drifted through the breeze. A monster raced by her. She jumped back and gagged from the powerful stench that zoomed past her. She coughed then blinked a few times before finally being able to see through the blurs of light that was coming closer. She coughed again as another monster zoomed past her once more. She shook out her pelt then took a deep breath. She raced to the other side before any monster could catch up to her.

She looked back at the thunderpath once she safely made it to the other side. Her breath was heavy, but she sighed with relief. The worst was hopefully over. She didn't recognize anything around her. She had never ventured away from her territory and she was way beyond the boundary lines.

She sought to find shelter as the rising sun began to drift through the clouds. She searched, but the wide open moors made her feel uneasy. She was easy to spot for any predators that lurked about. She opened her jaws and tasted the air. Only the faint smell of mist and rain could be identified. She padded on, knowing something had to come up. Finally, trees in the distance appeared and she raced up a narrow hill. Huge boulders blocked her way, just before the forest departed, making a small path to follow in between. She heaved herself up onto the boulder and looked out.

Mist and darkness took over the forest and she felt a sudden chill run down her spine. But it was better than being out in the open. She jumped down from the boulder and padded into the dark forest with her head held high. She found a large tree. Tree roots poked

out of the ground and lined with moss. She settled near the tree root and made herself as comfy as she could, as she was still able to look out in case any danger came poking about.

She was determined to find Shadowheart and seek truth if he truly killed Whitestorm, but she would have to find him another day. For now, she needed a lot of rest for the hard journey that lay ahead of her.

Chapter Two

Shadowheart's body ached as he traveled through harsh brambles all throughout the night. His paws throbbed with every step, the sharp sting of thorns digging into his flesh, leaving tiny droplets of blood that soon dried up and matted his fur.

The moon cast a pale light over the dense undergrowth, its silvery glow filtering through the tangled branches above. Shadowheart's breath came in ragged gasps, his chest heaving with the effort of pushing through the unforgiving terrain.

Despite the pain that gnawed at his every move, Shadowheart pressed on, driven by determination to put distance between himself and the life he had known. He became accustomed to the pain and trekked through, until he finally made it to the open and untouched lands beyond the Clans could ever know. His breath slowed as he caught his breath, looking down a steep hill.

Patches of snow still clung to the ground as a warm breeze began to drift towards Shadowheart. He lifted his muzzle and could smell a faint scent of rabbit. He licked his lips and crouched down, following the scent. The scent grew stronger as he made his way down the hill and into the long grass.

The wind gently rustled the blades of grass around him. The rhythmic whisper of the breeze intertwined with the distant chirping of crickets, creating a symphony that underscored his solitary journey. The open landscape afforded him a wide view, allowing him to scan the horizon thoroughly. In the distance, the faint outline of a rabbit caught his attention, its gentle movements barely visible against the backdrop of swaying grass.

He crept up slowly, making sure to avoid any sounds that could scare his prey. Once he was a safe distance, he leaped and caught the rabbit in his jaws. He bit down into its neck as he secured it with his paws. With a purr, he picked up the rabbit and padded to a place where he would remain hidden away from danger.

A garden lay near on the sidelines of the open field. He raced over to it and settled in the undergrowth of an abandoned twoleg den. He laid down and ate his catch, licking his paws and mouth once he finished.

Shadowheart prowled cautiously through the unfamiliar terrain, the stench of twolegs filling his nostrils as he cautiously weaved between dens that were occupied with fuming monsters resting by them. He sneaked past it all and sighed with relief once he reached the terrain that lay behind their dens.

The landscape beyond the Twoleg nests was a patchwork of overgrown grass and forgotten debris, a stark contrast to the harsh, sterile environment he had just traversed. The scent of fumes were soon forgotten and he was able to settle near an old tree stump. He laid down and let sleep take over him.

The morning light poked through the clouds, adding an orange glow to Shadowheart's fur. He opened his eyes at the first sight of light and set foot for a proper place to live until he found Scourge. Though the idea of seeking refuge within their towering nests was foreign and unsettling, the possibility of finding a secure shelter compelled him forward.

He made his way through once again, but more careful as twolegs began to come out of their dens and hop inside the monster's jaws. He scanned for any signs of movement towards him, but luckily his dark fur made him unnoticeable against the dawn's casting glow. He crept onward, seeking one that was not as busy.

Just as he thought he found one, a tortoiseshell she-cat came charging at him. She lunged at him, claws outstretched.

Shadowheart jumped and quickly went into a crouch and hissed furiously. He pummeled her to the ground and he pinned her down, growling and baring his teeth.

"Midnight?" She mewed. Her voice was soft.

Shadowheart held out his paw to rake her belly, but he hesitated and took a step back, letting the she-cat scramble to her paws. He

shook his head slowly. "No, I'm Shadowheart." He replied, cooly.

She looked down at her paws in awkwardness. Shadowheart debated whether to attack her while she wasn't looking or if perhaps she was actually friendly. She smelled of a kittypet and he guessed that she came from one of the nearby twoleg nests. "If you don't mind me asking, who is Midnight?"

The she-cat's amber eyes darkened as she answered. "Just another cat." She replied crossly. Shadowheart could feel he wasn't welcome, so he turned to go the other way. "Wait." She called out after him. He stopped and turned his head, glancing over his shoulder. He blinked curiously. "You're one of the Clan cats, aren't you?" She added.

Shadowheart turned back his head, facing forward. His eyes narrowed. "I used to be." His mew was hoarse.

"Used to be?" She tilted her head to the side. "My name's Whisper, by the way. I live just down yonder." She flicked her tail to the grassy moorlands that was surrounding a huge twoleg nest.

"I was blamed for something terrible and so I was banished." He explained, finally turning around and sitting down to face her.

Whisper padded a little closer to him, but still weary of his odd scent. "So you have come to seek refuge with the nofurs?"

Shadowheart tilted his head to the side. "Nofurs?"

"The things that stand on two legs." She explained, wrapping her tail over her front paws.

"Oh, we call them twolegs."

"Makes sense." A purr rumbled in her throat from amusement of the name. Both cats were silent for a few moments. "Midnight was my son. I had three kits." She paused and sighed, closing her eyes in shame. "My nofurs didn't want me having kits, so I ran as far as I could to give birth. I was so weak and frail, that I couldn't give them the milk they needed. I left to get food from my nofurs, then when I returned, two of my kits were dead."

Shadowheart listened in silence, and looked at her with pity in his eyes. "I'm sorry." He finally mewed, feeling her sadness swell up inside her. "I can't imagine what losing your kits feels like."

"One was missing. I looked for days, but I assume that he, too, passed." She finished. She shedded a small tear as she opened her eyes and looked at Shadowheart.

Shadowheart kept her gaze, then widened his eyes. "Where did you have your kits?" He asked, slowly.

Whisper shuffled her paws as if she was thinking and had forgotten where it was. Then she lifted her head and sighed just before answering. "It was in some tall grass. All the way down over there." She pointed with her muzzle.

Shadowheart glanced at the direction where she had pointed. It was near the Clan's territory. "In Clan cat territory?"

"I believe so." Her voice rasped, as she looked down trying to remember if she had smelled his Clan scent before.

Shadowheart rose to his paws and softened his eyes as a purr escaped from his throat. "I think that I am Midnight."

Chapter Three

"*How can you be so sure?" Her* voice was almost in a whisper.

"Scourge is my father." He explained.

Whisper widened her eyes in dismay. She took a few steps back and shook her head slowly. "I haven't seen him in many moons." She finally mewed, not able to look him in the eyes.

Shadowheart wanted to comfort her, but stayed where he was. Even though she was his mother, they weren't close enough yet.

"I..." She paused, her eyes still looking down at the ground. "I met him when he was still known as Tiny." She looked back up at him. Her mew was soft and calming as she continued. "We were so young. When I found out that I was having his kits, I not only ran from the nofurs, but from fear."

Shadowheart remembered Scourge had felt the same way. "Do you know where he might be?" His curiosity peaked, thinking they could see one another again.

"If he is still the same as he once was, he would be over there, below the gorge." She flicked her tail opposite of the sun's light.

"Could you take me there?" He didn't want to travel alone.

Whisper hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head. "Of course. But first let's stop inside to get something to eat."

Shadowheart reluctantly nodded his head in agreement. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to eat crowfood. "I'll wait out here." He softly mewed as she headed inside through an open window. She didn't seem to care as she bolted inside without any second thoughts if he was coming with her or not.

Shadowheart waited for what seemed like moons. He thought of hunting himself, but he heard a slight sound of claws coming inside

the den walls. He stared at the window that was cracked open just enough for a cat to crawl through. Whisper emerged from the cracked window and shook out her fur once she landed on the wooden deck. "Alright. Let's go." She purred.

Shadowheart and Whisper embarked on a long journey to the gorge. The bustling streets were alive with energy. Shadowheart found himself captivated by the rhythm of the city, though the sounds made him feel uneasy. "Can we go out of the twoleg world?" He asked, hopeful she would say yes.

"If we do, it won't be a straight path." She argued, stopping to look back at him.

Shadowheart thought for a moment before responding. "I am okay with taking a longer path."

Whisper sighed, then nodded her head. "Alright. This way." She veered towards an alley filled with rocks. It hurt his paws as he tried to make his way through. He winced with pain with almost every pawstep. Then he was finally relieved when his paws hit soft grass at the end of the path. Whisper hesitated, looking around, making sure no predators were lurking about.

Shadowheart did the same, knowing his senses would be stronger. He could smell mouse. His mouth watered as he realized he was hungry. He stepped out onto the grass first and followed the scent, his nose a whisker-length from the ground. Whisper watched him with curiosity. She stayed back, wondering if he had caught scent of danger.

As he padded further away, Whisper bolted after him. Catching up to him, she panted hard. "What are you doing?" She finally asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

"Shh." He hissed. "I smell mouse. I'm following the scent trail." He whispered, then immediately went back to sniffing the ground. A patch of snow that still clung to the grass, moved from underneath. Shadowheart stopped abruptly, then went into the hunter's crouch.

Whisper sat down and watched him with amusement. Shadowheart

crept forward, his eyes and ears alert. Once he was just a tail-length away, he paused. He pounced and landed awkwardly on the mouse. He caught it just before it could leap away from his reach and he bit down, killing it swiftly.

Whisper wrinkled up her nose from the stench of the dead mouse. "Yuck!" She spat.

Shadowheart looked up at her with surprise. *Did not all cats like the smell of mouse?* He picked up the mouse and began to eat it. He licked his lips once he finished, then swiped his paw over his muzzle.

Whisper led the way again, her eyes still filled with amusement. Shadowheart padded after her, his tail held high as he was full for the first time in a while. With leaf-bare finally over, he and Scourge could eat all they wanted.

They trekked on for what seemed like moons and the open field still kept going forever. He tried to look beyond the horizon, but all he could see was just an endless patch of swaying grass. "Are you sure we're going the right way?" He asked, now walking alongside her with the same rhythm as her.

"Yes, once we cross the field, we'll head through some farm lands, and the gorge is just behind it." She explained.

Shadowheart sighed. This journey was going to be longer than he had imagined.

Shadowheart caught a musky scent as they trekked on. He stopped, then lifted his muzzle, and opened his jaws to taste the air. It was a scent he has never smelled before. He wrinkled his nose, then glanced around, cautiously.

Whisper stopped as well. She could smell the same thing. "Fox." She whispered. "Run."

Shadowheart was slightly interested. He's never seen a fox before. He knew they were dangerous, but he wondered if they could outrun it. "Are they fast?" He mewed in between breaths as he

followed her through some tall and short grass.

Whisper didn't reply. She was focused on getting them out of the fox's territory, but the fox was too fast and cut them off, baring its teeth. Shadowheart's heart pounded in his chest as the fox's menacing gaze locked onto them.

Without a moment's hesitation, he sprang forward, his lithe body moving with practiced agility as he darted to the left, attempting to outmaneuver the fox. Whisper followed suit, her nimble frame quickly matching his pace as they weaved through the grass, their escape route growing narrower with each passing heartbeat.

The fox was hot on their heels. Shadowheart leaped just in time as jaws snapped behind him. He pushed himself to run faster, his claws digging into the soft earth. He could feel his heart beating faster and thought it would burst if he ran for much longer. He had no idea if he was heading the right way, but he had to keep going.

The fox snapped again. He then heard a shrill high-pitched howl echo around him. He stopped and looked back at the fox. It had Whisper's hind leg in its jaws and dragged her with it.

Shadowheart's muscles tensed as he sprang toward the fox, his body colliding with the creature's side in a desperate attempt to pull it away from Whisper. The fox, caught off guard by Shadowheart's sudden assault, let out a pained yelp, its grip on Whisper loosening slightly.

With fierce determination, Shadowheart pummeled with the fox, his snarls blending with the fox's own ferocious growls as they grappled on the ground. The smell of blood permeated the air, and he felt a surge of panic as Whisper's pained cries filled the space around them. Adrenaline flooded his veins, lending him strength as he fought to protect his mother.

Ignoring the sharp pain radiating from his own wounds, he sank his teeth into the fox's scruff, wrenching it away from Whisper's injured leg. With a fierce tug, he managed to dislodge the fox's grip, allowing Whisper to scramble free and put some distance between them and the enraged creature.

Breathing heavily, Shadowheart faced the fox head-on, his green eyes blazing as he prepared for the next round of the confrontation. The fox, its sleek form now slick with blood, circled him, its fangs bared in a vicious snarl.

Shadowheart hissed then and fluffed out his fur, trying to make himself look bigger. It snarled again. Shadowheart darted then weaved around it, snapping at its legs. The fox jumped in surprise and yelped again. He did it repeatedly until it finally gave up. It bolted the other direction and ran out of sight.

Shadowheart panted hard, his eyes blazing like fire as he watched the fox disappear into the sunlight. Whisper laid helplessly on grass, her sides heaving and struggling to breathe. Shadowheart padded over to her side. He nudged her with his muzzle, trying to help her to her paws.

"Go. Follow the field until you hit the farm lands. When you get to the farms, find someone named Bone. He should be able to help you find the gorge." Whisper coughed and gasped for air as she spoke. Her voice becoming weak with each word.

Chapter Four

Willowbreeze ventured deeper into the forest, each step taking her further away from the familiarity of her own Clan's territory. The dense underbrush forced her to weave and duck, her senses alert for any signs of danger that might be lurking in the shadows. The canopy above allowed only dappled light to filter through, casting a mosaic of shadows on the forest floor.

The forest seemed to stretch on endlessly, and as the sun began its descent, she quickened her pace, hoping to cover as much ground as possible before nightfall.

It twisted and turned, taking her through groves of ancient trees and narrow and meandering streams that gurgled softly as she made her way through the landscape.

Her stomach growled, making an echo in the forest. She looked around, trying to listen to the sounds that surrounded her.

The pungent earthiness of the forest mingled with the faint aroma of prey, a thrilling mixture that disoriented her accustomed senses. She strained to catch the subtle smell in the air, hoping to sense the location of something, yet she found herself incapable of identifying any potential targets.

Frustration gnawed at her as she contemplated her next move. She couldn't rely on the normal methods she had learned near the river, where the scent of fish lingered in the air and the rhythmic flow of the water guided her every move. Here, the undergrowth and thick canopy obscured the sky, casting the forest floor into a patchwork of light and shadow that made tracking elusive prey an impossible task.

As the evening light began to dim, her sense of unease deepened, and the growing gnaw of hunger threatened to overwhelm her.

She took a moment to sit and gather her thoughts. She sighed, her

breath misting in the slight cool air from the darkness of the night. If she didn't eat soon, she would be too weak to find herself someplace to sleep. She closed her eyes and let the forest open up her senses. She could smell something sweet. She opened her mouth to taste the air, trying to figure out if she could locate the sweet scent.

She reopened her eyes and followed the scent. A small bush grew off to the side and she spotted a cluster of berries, their deep crimson hues shimmering in the gentle night light. Relief flooded through her, though she knew it wouldn't satisfy her fully, but it would have to do. She approached the berries cautiously, savoring their rich fragrance and plucking them one by one from the bush.

Despite the temporary relief the berries provided, Willowbreeze's stomach continued to grumble, a persistent reminder of her unfulfilled hunger. She couldn't shake the feeling of emptiness. Resigned to the reality of her circumstances, she settled down on a rotten pile of leaves.

As she lay there, the haunting call of a night bird echoed through the trees, casting an eerie atmosphere. Her mind wandered to thoughts of Shadowheart, her memories of their shared moments in RiverClan flickering through her consciousness. She longed for his companionship, his warmth, and the familiar comfort that he often made her feel.

With a quiet sigh, she closed her eyes, allowing the forest's symphony of a lullaby to put her to sleep.

She opened her eyes, feeling rested, yet hunger still clung to her. She tried to stand, but she felt too weak to try again. Collapsing, her heart began racing with unease. She closed her eyes tightly, giving up to what StarClan had to offer her. Was this the end?

"Get up." Meowed a calming voice.

She quickly opened her eyes and looked around, frantically. No one was near her. She closed her eyes again.

"You must get up." She recognized the voice. It was Shadowheart,

but how was he speaking to her? She opened her eyes again and looked around once more. He was nowhere to be seen. She scrambled to her paws, now able to stand. Whatever had happened, she felt stronger by just his voice.

She decided to continue on her journey to find him, knowing that destiny would lead her right to him.

As she padded on, her paws continued to carry her deeper into the forest, her mind consumed by thoughts of Shadowheart.

Imagining his presence beside her, she let herself revel in the phantom sensation of his fur brushing against hers, the imagined warmth of his body offering her solace in the midst of the eerie surroundings. A soft purr escaped her as she envisioned their reunion, the moments they would share beyond the confines of the Clans and the boundaries that had once defined their connection.

She padded with ease, as if her hunger had suddenly passed. She forgot that she was hungry and felt almost full. She didn't know if it was just a dream, but all she knew was that she was able to go further than she ever imagined.

Willowbreeze kept going through the forest. It seemed to go on for a long time. At first she thought maybe she was going in circles and got frustrated with herself. But then she could suddenly smell water. She lifted her muzzle and began to sniff the air. It was a small stream. She could feel her mouth becoming dryer by the minute.

As she neared the water's edge, she slowed her pace and peered into it, watching the ripples dance upon the surface. Willowbreeze's parched throat tightened with anticipation, her longing for a cool, refreshing drink. She crouched beside the stream, and touched the cool to her lips.

It tasted nothing like the river back at home, but it quenched her thirst she didn't know she had.

Once she finished drinking, Willowbreeze's keen gaze remained fixed on the subtle movements from the wind that blew softly, her

hopes clinging to the possibility of spotting a glint of silver as a fish darted by. She felt a flicker of anticipation, her heart quickening with the possibility of a potential meal.

Time seemed to stretch as she patiently awaited any sign of life in the stream. Her senses remained finely tuned to any sudden disturbances, attuned to the rhythms of the forest and the ebb and flow of the water.

Suddenly, a shadowy shape emerged from the depths of the stream, gliding effortlessly through the water. Willowbreeze's eyes widened in excitement as she discerned the distinct silhouette of a fish gracefully navigating the currents. With calculated precision, she tensed her muscles and prepared to strike. As the fish drew nearer, she lunged, her forepaws slicing through the water and digging her claws into a large fish. It wriggled and tried to escape her paws, but she bit down quickly before it got away.

Chapter Five

Shadowheart has to continue without his mother, Whisper. He mourned her death for quite a while. Then finally he padded on towards the gorge. His only hope now was to find his father.

Shadowheart's paws felt heavy as he continued on his journey, each step weighed down by grief. His heart thudded in his chest, and his once swift gait had slowed to a solemn pace. The memories of their brief companionship echoed in his mind, adding to the weight he carried.

Exhausted and drained, he stumbled on, each step heavier than the last. Suddenly, the sound of pawsteps cut through the quiet night. Shadowheart's heart skipped a beat, expecting another attack from the fox.

He looked around frantically, but saw no one. Was he going crazy? His body ached and his matted fur was covered in blood. If it was the fox again, he had no intentions on fighting it.

"You look like you've been through a rough time," mewed a tom, a scar running down his muzzle.

Shadowheart raised his head, his eyes now locked onto a black-and-white tom. He felt too wary and fatigued to put up a fight. "Just passing through," he replied, his voice barely a whisper, "I was attacked by a fox." He explained a little louder.

The rogue eyed him thoughtfully, his initial aggression fading into something resembling pity.

"Where are you headed?" Another rogue padded out from some tall grass. Her fur was the color of honey and she blended in with the dead grass that laid beneath their paws.

"To the gorge." His voice still almost a whisper.

"Why would you want to go there?" The she-cat hissed and wrinkled her muzzle in disgust.

"I think my father lives there." His strength became a little better as he rested in the tall grass.

"Your father is Scourge?" The tom's eyes widened in dismay and fear.

"You know him?" He heaved himself up. Though he was still weak, he managed to get to his paws once more. "Can you take me to him?"

The cats looked at one another in exchange as if they had to see what the other thought. Neither of them spoke for a while until finally the black-and-white tom rose to his paws and nodded his head. "Sure, but we can only take you to the edge of the gorge. We can't go any further."

Shadowheart dipped his head in agreement. "I'm Shadowheart." He mewed, finally able to sound like his natural self.

"I'm Ginger, and this is Cookie." She flicked her tail towards her companion.

"Should we get going?" Shadowheart was eager to keep going.

"No. You are much too weak to go on. We have a den nearby where you will be safe to rest." Ginger replied hoarsely.

Shadowheart for once didn't argue. He knew that she was right. If he pushed himself, he would have no strength to go down into the gorge.

"And maybe you can rinse off the stench. You smell awful!" Added Cookie as he lead the way to their home.

He followed them in silence and remained close to Cookie and Ginger, their support a balm to his wearied spirit. They lead him to some bushes that were lined next to a pathway. They crossed the path and he could hear a small stream in the distance.

The sound of the trickling stream soothed his senses as they settled by its tranquil banks. He was glad to be near water. It wasn't much of a forest, but he felt safe.

He had no strength to clean himself, but if he wanted to keep warm, he should at least try. He lapped at his fur with long licks, whilist using the narrow stream to clean his paws. He stopped to breathe almost every few seconds his tongue sticking half out each time.

"I can bring you something to eat." Offered Ginger. Her green eyes gleamed with pride.

Shadowheart looked up at her. She reminded him of Sandstorm and that made him feel like he was back in the Clan life. He nodded his head in silence, then went back to cleaning himself.

Ginger bounded off to go hunt while Cookie stayed with him. He was quite scrawny and Shadowheart could see his ribs. They were starving, yet she was willing to hunt for Shadowheart. He suddenly felt uneasy, wondering if she really would come back with prey.

He was finally finished cleaning himself. All the blood stains disappeared and his pelt was shiny again for the first time in a long time. Ginger came padding back to them and dropped two mice in the middle of them. "I was able to get some mice. It's not much, but it's all we can eat nowadays."

"Thank you. This means a lot." Shadowheart mewed softly, and purred as he took the smaller mouse. He assumed they would share the other, so he didn't want to seem greedy. He ate it fairly quickly and licked his lips clean.

He then laid down to rest. As the night deepened, he found himself drifting into a slumber, his mind filled with fragmented dreams of distant memories and uncertain futures.

Shadowheart wandered through familiar terrain, each step guiding him through the vibrant landscapes of his former Clan home. He could smell the scents of his youth, the echoes of playful yowls and the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze.

Willowbreeze's gentle touch lingered in his memories, a soothing presence amidst the chaos of his recent struggles. He could feel her gentle breathing close to his and he began to purr softly.

Then his dreams suddenly began to grow darker as he remembered his mother, Whisper.

Amidst the tumult of his slumber, he saw fleeting glimpses of her, her fur sleek and bright, her amber eyes gleaming with a mother's love just before they faded from light.

At the first light of dawn, Cookie and Ginger were already awake, their watchful eyes fixed on the horizon. Shadowheart rose to his paws, the crisp morning air invigorating his senses. He was still attuned to his dreams being in view and he glanced around a bit before remembering where he was.

"Did you sleep well?" Purred Ginger.

Shadowheart yawned then nodded his head slowly. "A bit." He admitted.

"Good let's get going. We'll just follow this stream. It should lead us to the gorge." Cookie almost sounded agitated.

As they approached the final stretch, the trees began to thin, allowing glimpses of a steep drop that indicated the presence of the gorge. The ground sloped gently downward. Ginger and Cookie peered over the edge and shivered.

"This is where we leave you." Mewed Cookie. His gaze fixed on the frightening edge.

Ginger dipped her head, "I hope all goes well with you and your father." Her voice soft and nourishing.

Shadowheart purred and turned his head toward the gorge and peered down the slope. He could hear Ginger and Cookie heading back to their den. He looked back over the gorge, trying to see if he could see Scourge, but he could see nothing.

A few moments later, a hulking figure emerged from the shadows

ahead. Shadowheart recognized him immediately. It was Bone.

Bone's imposing form loomed over him. His black-and-white fur was matted and scarred, a testament to the battles he had endured. His sharp gaze seemed to penetrate Shadowheart's very being, probing for any hint of deception.

"It's been a while, Shadowheart," Bone rumbled.

Chapter Six

Waterlily padded lightly through the open field leading to the Moonstone. The soft glow of the half-moon above lighted her path as she made her way down. She could hear mumbles from the other medicine cats as she neared Mothermouth.

"New-leaf has brought us many blessings." Meowed Mudfur as Waterlily approached them.

"Hi, Waterlily." Littlecloud looked over at Waterlily and purred softly.

Waterlily kept silent but dipped her head in acknowledgment. She didn't feel like talking. Especially about what has happened since the Gathering. She worried about Firestar becoming sick in the mind like Bluestar had when she lost her trust in her clanmates.

"Anything new with you?" It was Barkface who spoke, looking at Waterlily with curiosity and wondering why she was so distant.

Waterlily found herself lost in thought and shook her head as if to clear it when she heard Barkface talking to her. "Since Whitestorm's death? Nothing." She rasped, her voice almost sounding cold.

"I am truly sorry. I know it couldn't have been easy." He admitted.

"Let's go inside before we lose the moonlight." She growled softly as she led the way down into the dark tunnel. The others agreed and followed her in silence. Waterlily laid down and watched as the others settled near her, before touching her nose to the cold, stone walls.

She opened her eyes in the world of StarClan. Barkface stood beside her. She glanced over to the other side of her and Mudfur padded up to them. Littlecloud then doing the same. Waterlily looked back ahead when she heard a soft voice call out to them.

"Darkness is gathering on the horizon," the she-cat intoned, her voice echoing through the cosmic expanse. "A force has been set into motion, a collision of destinies that will determine the future of the forest. There will come a time when the threads of fate will be tangled, and choices will weigh heavy upon the hearts of those you love."

Waterlily felt a chill settle over her, knowing that the she-cat's words carried the weight of truth.

"The path ahead is treacherous, and the past will haunt the present." She murmured, her gaze penetrating each medicine cat's soul. "Beware the deeds of those who bear secrets that may unravel the form of your Clans. The battle lines will blur, and a lone figure will rise, entangled in the echoes of the past, destined to confront a legacy that he must reckon with."

Waterlily's breath caught in her throat as the gravity of her words settled over her. She exchanged glances with the others, wondering if they understood what the old she-cat was talking about.

"Thank you for telling us this, Brambleberry." Meowed Mudfur.

Waterlily turned back to Brambleberry. She knew that she was a medicine cat from how she smelled, but she did not recognize her. She guessed that she was from RiverClan from her fishy scent. The others didn't seem to know who she was either, except Mudfur.

Brambleberry dipped her head then padded off into the distance. Waterlily couldn't look at the others in the eyes. She knew who it could be, and it made her shutter inside. She lowered in her head as if she felt ashamed of her silence. Mudfur dipped his head adue, then laid his tail over Waterlily's flank.

"We will get through this." He murmured, then led the way through the tunnel. Waterlily sighed, then followed behind. She trotted into the dawn light. It was tinted with an orange hue across the sky.

"Should we meet about this once we figure out some information?" Mudfur meowed just before Littlecloud was about to head back to camp.

"What do you mean?" Hissed Barkface. "We can't just go about it like it's gossip and expect us to spill it out to one another."

Mudfur sat down and narrowed his head. "That is not what I meant."

Waterlily rolled her eyes and sat across Barkface and held his gaze for a short moment before she spoke. "Let's just agree to meet again in a quarter moon and see if anyone has heard anything about what Brambleberry told us."

Barkface kept her gaze for another moment, then finally dipped his head in agreement. "Very well." Then he headed up the small hill leading to his camp. Littlecloud dipped his head as well and padded away toward ShadowClan. Mudfur and Waterlily then followed suit in silence. Waterlily couldn't shake the feeling of thinking it was Shadowheart that was the victim of StarClans' prophecies. Even though she knew that he was when he killed Whitestorm.

She was so lost in thought that she almost trekked into ShadowClan territory. She halted and saw Littlecloud hunched behind a boulder. "I thought you were some rogue coming to attack me!" He hissed.

Waterlily widened her eyes in alarm and blinked a few times in confusion. "Could you not smell my scent?" She replied with a cold hiss.

"I'm sorry. You just scared me is all." He meowed more calmly.

Waterlily relaxed her muscles and she was suddenly more aware of how her emotions were impacting her personality. "No, I should be sorry. I've been so caught up with Shadowheart killing Whitestorm thing, that it has made me just too angry to care."

"What, who's Shadowheart?" Littlecloud shook his head as if something about him made himself feel uneasy.

"He was Sandstorm's apprentice. The kit I... took in." She tilted her to the side as if answering that was pointless.

"StarClan said something about a dark figure." He began pacing the green grass, back and forth.

"She said that a lone figure will rise, yes." She confirmed his statement was correct.

"Do you believe it could be Shadowheart that is the one they're speaking of?" His breath began to deepen and he stopped and looked over at Waterlily.

Waterlily was speechless. She wanted to defend him, but couldn't find the right words. She nodded her head in acceptance and softly sighed. "I fear you are right."

Chapter Seven

Shadowheart stood with his eyes wide in fear. He had forgotten how massive Bone was. He puffed out his chest and spoke carefully. "Have you seen Scourge around?"

"No." He shook his broad head. His battle scars glittered as old wounds were resurfaced not too long ago.

Shadowheart slumped back down and sighed with frustration.

Bone watched with amusement, then sat down, wrapping his skinny tail over front paws. "Come. I'll show you where you can wait for him." He then beckoned him with the tip of his tail.

Shadowheart followed, his head still low in disgust that he traveled all this way to no luck. Bone led him to a steep and narrow path that went beanthe the gorge. His scrawny tail, flicked to and fro as the path winded around through some dark tunnels into the stone walls. Shadowheart could barely see a whisker-length in front of him and relied only on his scenes of touch to navigate through the darkness. Once he reached the light once more, he squinted from the bright sun shining down onto him.

"We're nearly there." Called out Bone.

Shadowheart softly scoffed. Did he think he was useless? He trotted a little faster and kept his balance as they traveled down to a steep hill of rocks. Bone guided Shadowheart through the twisting passages until they arrived at a small den nestled within the gorge. The entrance was concealed by overhanging ferns and a low-hanging rock, offering an appearance of seclusion.

"Here is where you can stay. Scourge should be here within a couple of days. He usually resides here, but he is off hunting as of now." Bone explained.

Shadowheart dipped his head in thanks then padded inside. It felt

cold and dreary as he entered, but it would have to be suffice enough if he wanted to talk to Scourge.

"If you need to hunt, you can go back up where you came. There's not much to offer, but you'll be satisfied." Bone meowed, then kept going on his way down the gorge.

"Thank you!" He shouted after him as he watched him leave with ease down the stony pathways. He could feel his paws ache and he longed for Waterlily's medicine supply or knowledge that would normally help him. He laid down and rested his head on his paws, looking out into the distance. He was to wait a long time.

The sun peeked through some clouds and shined brighter into Shadowheart's eyes. It made him want to close his eyes, but he resisted not wanting to accidentally fall asleep during the day. The sun was then hidden behind some clouds once more. He gathered all of his strength to head back up to get some something to eat. But then a small bird landed on the open area a few fox-lengths in front of him. He positioned himself slowly into a hunter's crouch, not taking his eyes off the small chaffinch. He crept slowly, hoping his black pelt would be like a shadow to the bird.

The bird lifted its head and looked around. Shadowheart froze, and kept his gaze, making sure not to make even the slightest sound of breathing or twitching. The bird then went back to pecking at the small pebbles below its feet. Shadowheart crept again, getting closer to the bird. It noticed his presence and leaped into the air as fast as it could, but Shadowheart was too fast and caught it with one swift jump.

"Very well caught." Praised Bone, padding back up to him.

Shadowheart dropped his catch and purred with delight. "Thanks." He closed his eyes and thanked StarClan silently. *Thank you, StarClan for this easy catch and your blessings you have given me on this journey.* He reopened them and began plucking out the feathers with delicate bites, then spit it out beside him.

Bone remained silent and looked out into the distance as if he was lost in thought. His contemplative silence hung in the air, mingling

with the distant echoes of the gorge. As Shadowheart observed the massive tom, a chill raced down his spine. His fighting skills were probably very keen.

As Bone remained lost in contemplation, Shadowheart returned his attention to the small catch at his paws. Once he was finished, he began to clean himself. Licking his front paw, he carefully swiped it across his face. His tongue's rough texture caught on bits of stray feathers and dirt. He spat it out next to him, and then continued to wash it between the pads of his paws.

When he finished washing himself, he noticed that Bone was gone. He then padded to the edge of the gorge and looked around, seeing if he could see Bone anywhere, or even Scourge, but he was still much too high up to see even the faintest signs of movement at the bottom of the gorge.

The solitude settled over Shadowheart like a familiar cloak. He dismissed thoughts of Bone, realizing that he had grown accustomed to being alone. With a final glance over the gorge's edge, he turned away. The stone walls rose tall, a barrier between him and the world below. He padded along the narrow pathway, the only sounds the soft echoes of his own steps against the rocky terrain. He wanted to see what else was hidden between the gorge.

The stony walls, marked with the scars of time, towered overhead, casting a cool shadow on the ground. Each step echoed softly, a rhythmic beat against the stone.

With the fading light casting elongated shadows across the gorge, Shadowheart's curiosity sparked as he watched Bone's silhouette disappear around the rocky bend. There was purpose in his steps, and the dark-furred rogue seemed to be guided by a hidden agenda.

Intrigued, Shadowheart thought to follow him, but hesitated and decided not to risk it.

Shadowheart stood alone, the fading light casting narrow shadows across the rugged rocks. An air of uncertainty lingered, and he wondered if some secrets were best left undisturbed.

As the last remainder of daylight surrendered to the night, Shadowheart turned away from the puzzling path and retraced his steps. The gorge, now shrouded in darkness, harbored its secrets, and he, for the time being, was content to let them rest.

Chapter Eight

Willowbreeze stayed by the stream, her eyes still gleaming as she waited for any more signs of movement. Time seemed to stretch, only the hoot of an owl was heard in the distance. She sighs, realizing it would be quite a while till another fish came along, so she decided to follow the stream in hopes to find more on the way.

It weaved through the trees. She kept her distance from the gurgling water that lapped through certain parts of the forest, but dared not to stray too far from it. The scent of the forest lingered in her nostrils as she padded on. The rustling undergrowth hinted at the presence of small mammals, possibly mice or voles, darting away from her path. She then caught sight of some butterflies, their delicate wings painted in array of colors as they fluttered past her. She stopped and stared in awe of their beauty. She didn't see butterflies very often and she wondered if they ventured more in the forest.

Suddenly another scent caught her attention. She recognized it, but couldn't quite gather where she had scented it before. She searched the waters, thinking it could be a fish she may have missed while being distracted by the colors of the butterfly. She saw nothing. Not even a ripple in the stream. She laid her ears back in frustration, wondering why only one fish was seen in a stream. She sat down, and lowered her head, closing her eyes. She focused on the scent, trying to remember where she had smelled it before. Then it came to her. It was a faint scent from Shadowheart.

She couldn't tell what his scent was mingled with, but it carried her through the trees and she forgot about her hunger as she followed her nose. It led her through a winding path of trees and then to an open field. She stopped and glanced around, not sure where the open moors would lead her. She padded cautiously as the scent of musk began to linger in the distance.

As Willowbreeze continued her journey, her senses alert to the scents of the forest. Following her nose, she approached the source

and discovered a lifeless form—a tortoiseshell she-cat. She leaned in, inhaling the lingering fragrance of Shadowheart that clung to the surroundings.

Willowbreeze's heart sank as she started at the lifeless form of the she-cat. Sorrow and concern welled up within her. Did Shadowheart kill yet another cat? She sniffed the body again. No. She had Shadowheart's scent, but he couldn't have killed her. He wouldn't. She shook her head to clear it and then padded onward, knowing that she was at least heading the right way.

The scent of pine and earth enveloped her, offering a comforting contrast to the unsettling discovery she had just encountered. She headed into the trees, knowing that she would be navigate safely through the thick forests.

As she moved deeper into the heart of the forest, Willowbreeze couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Her instincts heightened, she picked up her pace, navigating through the foliage.

The stream widened into a small clearing where the sun's rays dappled the ground, creating a serene ambiance. Willowbreeze felt a sense of tranquility wash over her, temporarily easing the tension that had gripped her since finding the tortoiseshell she-cat. She decided to rest for a while, enjoying the soothing melody of the flowing water.

As she settled on a mossy rock near the stream, Willowbreeze's thoughts turned once again to Shadowheart. What could have led him on such a path? The mystery of his actions gnawed at her, making her question the true nature of her lover. Yet, amidst the uncertainty, a part of her clung to the hope that there might be redemption for him.

With a sigh, Willowbreeze closed her eyes, letting the gentle sounds of the forest envelop her. She hoped that the path she had chosen would eventually lead her to answers.

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She woke up with a startle as the scent of cats filled her nostrils.

Was she back in RiverClan? She looked around and knew that she was still on her journey. Two cats then emerged out of the shadows. Willowbreeze widened her eyes in alarm and bristled her neck fur.

"I am not afraid to fight!" She spat.

The two cats looked at one another with amusement. "We aren't here to fight you." Meowed the she-cat. "I'm Ginger, by the way." She added with a purr.

Willowbreeze relaxed her body, but she was still weary of them. "I'm Willowbreeze." She dipped her head in return to the old she-cat.

"And I'm Cookie. You are welcome to rest here if you like for the night." Meowed the tom padding up to Ginger's side.

"Thank you."

"Ginger and I don't have much to eat, but you are also welcome to have whatever you can hunt." He flicked his tail towards the forest around them. "Are you a Clan cat?" He added, tilting his head to the side.

"Yes! You know about us?" Willowbreeze suddenly felt more at ease and her concern turned to happiness.

"Well, a bit." Answered Ginger. "A cat named Shadowheart came here a few sunrises ago. He was seeking to find the gorge."

"Shadowheart?" She widened her eyes in dismay. "He was here?" She now felt excited that she was getting closer to him.

"Are you his..." Ginger paused, not really wanting to assume anything, "lover?" She finished.

Willowbreeze hesitated. She didn't really know what they were. She nodded her head, thinking it's probably best to say they were.

"Great. We'll take you to the gorge at dawn." Meowed Cookies as he began to pad away. Ginger followed dipped her head follower Cookie out of sight.

Willowbreeze watched them leave, and began wondering how much longer it would be till she saw Shadowheart. Was he close? She lifted her muzzle and sniffed the air. She couldn't scent him anywhere. Then she began to worry.

Were they lying? She widened her eyes in dismay once again. Her breath became shallow with worry. She couldn't bring herself to go back to sleep now.

Willowbreeze kept vigil by the stream. The night wore on, and the moon began its descent. Every passing moment intensified her yearning to see Shadowheart's familiar form, to share the moonlit solitude with him, but now she may never see him. She flattened her ears and shuffled her paws, thinking what a pair of unknown cats would do to her.

She gulped for air as a horrid thought came to mind. *What if they killed Shadowheart and threw him over the gorge?*

Chapter Nine

"Are you ready?" Cookie's black-and-white pelt blew in the wind as he approached Willowbreeze.

Willowbreeze blinked open her eyes, and nodded her head slowly. She didn't remember drifting off to sleep, but it felt good even though she didn't sleep for long.

"To the gorge we go... again." Mewed Ginger, crossly.

Willowbreeze flinched from her tone. Did she not like going to the gorge? Cookie led the way, his tail stood straight up in the air. While, Ginger, trudged along behind him, with Willowbreeze following beside her.

Ginger kept her gaze ahead, and made no signs of wanting to talk. Willowbreeze was curious and wanted to know everything about them, but she dared not to make a sound in case it made them angrier.

Not knowing what would happen next, made her whiskers tremble. She Could feel her ears pounding with almost every step she took. If she trusted the wrong cats, she would be crowfood. Her heart began to race as she started to worry more and more.

"So what brings you to the gorge?" Mewed Cookie as he slowed his pace to walk beside Willowbreeze.

Willowbreeze twitched her whiskers with amusement. "I want to meet someone there. Shadowheart. He... he did something terrible. Well at least that's what the Clans think." She paused.

"What do they think he did?" Cookie was very curious in this juicy news of the mysterious black cat they once met.

"Firestar said he killed a deputy in ThunderClan."

Cookie stopped and widened his eyes. "You don't believe him?"

"I want to believe Shadowheart is good hearted, but I don't know." She stopped beside him and hung her head low.

"You've gone this far," Ginger swiped a paw over her ear, "so why stop now? You're so close."

Willowbreeze twitched her nose, unknowing if she did the right thing. She was glad that Ginger finally spoke softly.

Cookie nodded in agreement. "If you've come all this way, you might as well see it through. You never know, you might find him and learn the truth."

Willowbreeze sighed with doubt in her eyes. "I hope so." She looked down at her paws. "I just need to know."

Ginger gave her a reassuring nudge. "You're brave, coming all this way alone. Don't doubt yourself now."

With that encouragement, Willowbreeze purred softly and nodded her head in acceptance. "Well, we mustn't keep him waiting." She urged them to keep going.

Ginger and Cookie swiftly nodded at one another and led the way, with their tails held high. Willowbreeze followed them in silence and kept her mind steady until they finally reached an open field. She could see it. The gorge was close! She could feel her paws tingle with excitement, or was it nerves? She was still weary of her two companions. Even though they were friendly, she still didn't trust them.

"Okay." Mewed Ginger. "We're here. Just follow that path down. It should lead you into the gorge."

"Thank you." Purred Willowbreeze. "I really needed this." She added, softening her eyes as she glanced at both cats that stood in front of her.

"Of course." Cookie dipped his head. Ginger dipped her head as well, but she kept silent.

Willowbreeze turned towards the path leading down into the gorge.

She took a deep breath and headed down.

"Good luck!" She heard one of them call out. She couldn't quite tell who it was, but she wasn't about to turn back and ask.

The air in the gorge felt heavy with the scent of damp earth and moss. Willowbreeze padded quietly, her senses alert to every sound and movement. As she walked, memories of Shadowheart lingered in her mind.

The small clearing where he had rested before drew her attention. Stopping near the familiar scent, Willowbreeze observed the moss-covered den and the traces of a cat's presence. "He's alive." She softly purred to herself.

She settled down in the clearing, her gaze lingering on the path ahead. The gorge seemed to echo with the whispers of the past, and Willowbreeze found herself contemplating the choices that had led her here. She wondered if Shadowheart would ever return, and if he did, what kind of cat he would be.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the gorge, Willowbreeze couldn't help but feel a sense of solitude in this wild, mysterious place. She took another deep breath and continued down further into the gorge. She kept her nose keen to any signs of Shadowheart being nearby, but to no avail.

Just as she thought she would never find him, she heard his voice a few fox-lengths down. "Willowbreeze? Is that you?" Willowbreeze stopped and widened her eyes. It was Shadowheart. Her heart skipped a beat as he padded closer to her. He stopped, purred softly and rubbed her cheek with his whiskers. "I never thought I'd see you here."

Willowbreeze was speechless and didn't know what to say. She sat down and curled her tail over her front paws. "I came to know the truth."

Shadowheart dipped his head to the side. "About what? Why Whitestorm is dead?" He paused for a moment. "Firestar really did tell everyone." He muttered half to himself.

Willowbreeze suddenly felt bad for him, but it didn't answer her questions. "Yes. I just need to know if you really did it." She got to her paws and slightly narrowed her eyes. "I didn't believe Firestar. I just... need to know." She could feel heart quicken as she looked down at her paws.

Shadowheart sighed and shook his head slowly, then looked down at his paws."I did not kill Whitestorm. I was just as shocked as everyone else when I found him. I just... found him first."

Willowbreeze lifted her head then tilted it to the side in confusion. "Why did they suspect you?"

Shadowheart sat down and wrapped his fluffy tail over his front paws. "There's another black cat around, that has been tormenting with ThunderClan." He narrowed his eyes again, but in anger of someone Willowbreeze did not know. She longed to know more details, but Shadowheart stopped.

Shadowheart's words hung in the air, leaving a sense of tension. Willowbreeze's eyes widened with curiosity. Another black cat tormenting ThunderClan? The revelation intrigued her. "Who is this cat?" she asked, her voice a soft whisper in the quiet gorge.

Shadowheart's gaze remained distant, as if lost in thought. "A rogue named Scourge. He's ruthless and cunning. ThunderClan is facing challenges, and Scourge seems to be at the heart of it."

Willowbreeze's fur bristled at the mention of Scourge. The name held a weight of foreboding, as if darkness itself had taken feline form. "What does he want with ThunderClan?" she inquired, her mind racing with worry.

Shadowheart hesitated before responding, his words measured. "He wants revenge."

Chapter Ten

Waterlily padded out of the den, her paws making no sound against the soft earth. She carried fresh herbs in her mouth, then gulped them down as she made her way up the ravine and out of camp. She stopped to look back for one second longer before vanishing into the thick undergrowth. Frostfur stood just a few tail-lengths from the nursery. She had a desperate look in her eyes that made Waterlily feel uneasy.

She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She had to focus on her duty, not on her past. She had to meet with the other medicine cats, and see what StarClan had to say. She's already been late the last few times. She quickened her pace and met up with Barkface as she headed down a small hill that led just outside of the WindClan border. She followed it and Barkface joined her, his pelt almost brushing hers.

"Cheer up, Waterlily. This won't be a nightmare forever." He urged her hopes on.

Waterlily narrowed her eyes, and kept her gaze on the ground as they still continued their way to the Moonstone. She couldn't bare thinking of it being a nightmare. This was real, and she couldn't keep her mind from it, no matter how hard she tried.

Barkface and Waterlily made it to the Moonstone just before the moon hit its highest peak. Waterlily padded down and greeted Mudfur with a slight nod. Littlefoot then padded up to them. His fur was ruffled and messy as if he didn't clean himself for a whole moon. Waterlily suddenly felt sorry for him, and his Clan. "Should we go inside while we still have moonlight?" He meowed with a bit of rasp in his voice.

Mudfur dipped his head in agreement. "Yes, I agree. Let's go." He then led the way down into the tunnel.

Waterlily followed after him and squinted her eyes as the glow of

the moonstone almost blinded her. The scent of herbs then calmed her as Littlecloud padded up beside her. "You look exhausted. Are you alright?" Mewed Waterlily, her pelt brushed up against Littlecloud.

"Yes, just a little tired is all. Being a medicine cat can be quite a lot at times." He purred. He stopped and turned to her. "Thanks." He added, then headed towards his spot next to Mudfur. Waterlily looked down at her paws. She felt like he wasn't telling her everything. He was keeping something from her, but she didn't want to dwell too much on it. She softly sighed then took her place next to Barkface and touched the cold stone with her nose.

The Moonstone seemed to draw her into its depths, transporting her to a dreamlike glade bathed in the silvery light of the moon. A small, white and black speckled she-cat, formed in front of her. "Waterlily," she greeted, her voice a gentle murmur carried by a breeze that seemed to echo with the whispers of StarClan.

"Brambleberry." Waterlily greeted her with a purr.

"There is much danger to come, Waterlily." Brambleberry's meow was suddenly bitter as if she was seeing danger for the first time in her life.

"What can you tell me of this danger?" She chose her words carefully, knowing that StarClan was always vague with theirs.

Brambleberry didn't say anything. She closed her eyes and touched Waterlily's forehead with her nose. "Just watch." She whispered.

Waterlily closed her eyes, then reopened them. She was in ShadowClan territory. She could smell their foul scent, but she padded closer to the crowd of cats that stood in the middle of the clearing. She gasped in horror as she got closer and noticed the scent of death. She pushed her way through the cats. ThunderClan, RiverClan and WindClan was all here and she glanced around at the faces. Some of the cats looked satisfied as if they wanted this cat to die. Her gaze then followed theirs and she stopped as she saw who the lifeless body belonged to. It was Tigerstar.

She then looked at the cat that was standing over his body. "No, Shadowheart. How could you?" She softly whispered. Shadowheart turned to her, his eyes blazed like fire. At first it all seemed blurred, then her gaze focused as she narrowed her eyes in anger. Wrapped snugly around Shadowheart's neck was a purple collar, its edges lined with menacing teeth. She widened her eyes in alarm, then tilted it with more confusion. Were those the teeth of the cats he killed?

Brambleberry then took a step back and looked Waterlily in the eyes."There will be lots of blood spilled, but it won't be for nothing." She meowed softly, then padded away.

Waterlily was left alone for a short moment. She blinked open her eyes. She was back in the Moonstone. The others were stirring as well and she wondered if they had such crazy visions as well. They didn't seem phased by their dreams, so she kept silent as they headed up the tunnel and into the light. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, then reopened them as she got used to the light of dawn.

The other medicine cats departed with a slight nod, unaware of the danger that laid ahead of them. She trod silently through the open fields then stopped just before she hit the thunderpath. Monster roared past her, making their foul stench linger behind them. She crossed once she had a clear runway and stayed alongside the WindClan border once more.

As she entered the camp, shadows danced on the edges of her vision and her eyes flickered with an unspoken worry. The dawn light seemed charged with a strange energy as she made her way towards the medicine den.

Cinderpelt then padded up to her as she entered the familiar scents of herbs. "I'm glad you're back. We were getting worried." She mewed as she sat down awkwardly on her haunches.

"Sorry. I guess StarClan had a lot to share." Her voice drifted as if she was lost in thought.

Cinderpelt dipped her head in acknowledgement, noticing that

Waterlily would be best to leave alone for now. She got to her paws and headed out of the den. Waterlily lifted her head and watched as Cinderpelt left the medicine den. "Wait." She finally called out.

Cinderpelt stopped in her tracks and turned to face Waterlily, her eyes bursting with curiosity.

Waterlily looked down at her paws, not really knowing what to say. She trusted Cinderpelt, but she knew that she wasn't allowed to say anything until she spoke with Firestar. "Is Firestar in his den?" She finally asked.

Cinderpelt nodded slowly.

"Thank you." Waterlily meowed softly. "I can tell you once I get more details." She added then lightly brushed past Cinderpelt as she made her to the leader's den.

She announced herself before she entered. Firestar scrambled to his paws. He looked as if StarClan had been haunting his dreams. He sat down and slouched his shoulders, his head hanging low.

"I fear..." She stopped, thinking that Firestar could be ill. "Are you alright, Firestar?"

Firestar took a deep breath and straightened up his position. "I'm just a little tired is all. Can't sleep much these past few moons." He confessed.

"I can give you some herbs if you like, I have uh, poppy..."

She was cut off from Firestar's harsh hiss. "I'm fine."

"Of course, sorry." She dipped her head and could meet Firestar's eyes as she spoke of her dream with StarClan. "I fear Shadowheart will come back." She finished.

Firestar then widened his eyes. "Shadowheart is the one that will kill Tigerstar?"

Waterlily finally looked up at him. His eyes were clouded with worry, yet satisfaction at the same time. "What do you mean?"

Firestar looked down at his paws, "Tigerstar has nine lives. Unless he kills him nine times, that... " He paused, "just sounds impossible." He looked back up at Waterlily.

"I don't know." She finally meowed. She really didn't know what would come of it. If Shadowheart was the one to kill Tigerstar, Firestar could be next. "What if he comes after you next?" Firestar's eyes looked confused, so Waterlily continued. "He killed Whitestorm, remember?"

Firestar then felt as if he was jerked back to the real world. "Yes, I remember. We'll have to stop him somehow."

"How can we stop someone so powerful that he can kill a cat nine times?"

Firestar shrugged. "We can only hope StarClan keeps giving you these warnings. Once you know more details, I want to hear it. I have a feeling this day could be coming faster than we think."

Chapter Eleven

"Why revenge?" Her voice was hoarse in disbelief. Shadowheart took a soft breath, then looked down at his paws, not able to think of anything to say. Nothing that she would understand, that is. His gaze faltered, a storm of conflicting emotions swirling in his eyes. The weight of his thoughts caught in his throat.

Willowbreeze, her eyes a reflection of empathy, spoke softly, "Sometimes, the wounds we carry, are too deep for words. Whenever you're ready, I'm here to listen."

Shadowheart blinked in relief and softened them as he looked at her. "Thank you." He purred.

Willowbreeze reached out, her tail gently brushing against Shadowheart's flank. "Tell me, Shadowheart," Willowbreeze softly urged. "Not about the past or the accusations. Tell me about it now. How have you been?"

Shadowheart closed his eyes as he felt her touch once more. "The journey was long." He spoke slowly as if he thinking about how exactly he felt. He paused for a brief moment, "but I met someone on the way." He thought of Whisper. He then remembered her death. "She died from a fox. She..." He paused again and gulped for air as his eyes clouded with sorrow. "She helped me through the journey." He didn't want to tell her about his mother. He feared maybe he had already spoken too much about Scourge.

She looked down at her paws and shuffled them as if she was hesitant to ask him something. Finally, she raised her head and mewed, "Do you plan on coming back?"

Shadowheart blinked open his eyes. He hadn't thought of trying to come back. The Clans banished him. "I'm a rogue." He finally rasped, stretching out his forepaws. "I can't just simply walk back into ThunderClan." He added with a yawn.

Willowbreeze nodded understandingly, her gaze unwavering. "I know the Clans has cast you out, but sometimes things change. Cats change. You might find your way back, if not to ThunderClan, then perhaps to a place where you truly belong."

Shadowheart looked at her, a mix of gratitude and uncertainty in his eyes. The idea of belonging seemed like a distant dream, an echo from a time when he was still part of the Clan. Yet, the glimmer of hope in Willowbreeze's words sparked something within him. "Maybe," he whispered, more to himself than to Willowbreeze. "But for now, I have my journey to complete."

Willowbreeze leaned closer, her warmth a comforting presence. "You don't have to face it alone, Shadowheart."

Shadowheart pricked his ears. "I must do this alone. You belong in RiverClan. "

Willowbreeze stood up, and her eyes narrowed. "You can't!" She hissed, turning to face him. "Let me go with you."

Shadowheart shook his head. "I'm sorry, Willowbreeze, but I can't let you." He couldn't meet her gaze. His voice was deep.

Willowbreeze nodded, her eyes reflecting frustration. "I know you have your reasons, Shadowheart. Just... promise me you'll be careful out there."

He met her gaze, a silent acknowledgment passing between them. "I promise," he replied, then turned to head down the gorge. He didn't dare look back in case she was still standing there.

The narrow path snaked downward through the steep gorge, the rocky walls towering above. His black fur was nothing but a shadow from the sun's rays beating down on him.

Shadowheart perched on a stony outcrop near his makeshift nest, the rough edges pressing against his flank. His bright green eyes, usually sharp and alert, now carried a distant look. His thoughts, like restless river currents, swirled with questions. Would they accept him back into the Clans?

The murmur of the wind through the gorge seemed to carry whispers. Whispers of hate and regret. He flattened his ears and looked down at his paws.

Willowbreeze's offer lingered, a fragile bridge between his solitary life and the prospect of belonging. The idea of joining RiverClan tugged at the edges of his consciousness.

Shadowheart shut his eyes tight, trying to figure out what to do. His mind was all over the place, and he couldn't seem to settle on a decision. When he opened his eyes, he just stared across the gorge, feeling the wind gusting around him. It made him shiver like Scourge himself was in the air.

Shadowheart shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. The idea of joining RiverClan and living with Willowbreeze lingered in his mind instead. It seemed like a chance for a new start, away from the hardships of being a rogue, yet he knew they might still not accept him.

With a final glance across the gorge, he stood up, the muscles in his sleek black frame flexing. Shadowheart began to head up the narrow path, each step echoing the journey he was about to undertake, but this time with a companion.

He could hear her footsteps at the top of the gorge. He raced up behind her and called out her name. "Willowbreeze, wait!"

Willowbreeze froze. She was stunned that he came up from the gorge. "You're..." She paused, thinking perhaps it wasn't true. "Are you coming with me?" She finally asked, turning to face him now.

Shadowheart nodded and purred lightly, "yes, if they'll accept me." He then looked down at his paws. He really didn't know if they would, but it was worth the try.

The plateau above the gorge sprawled beneath the soft glow of the moon. Shadowheart and Willowbreeze stood side by side, their fur absorbing the silvery light that bathed the landscape. The scent of the gorge lingered. Willowbreeze turned her gaze toward the horizon, then she headed the opposite way. Shadowheart followed

in silence, his mind still racing. What if this really was a bad idea and the Clans would banish him all over again? He trekked faster to match Willowbreeze's speed. "RiverClan heard the news from Firestar, though." He meowed as if he trying to convince himself this was a bad idea.

Willowbreeze, slowed her pace a bit and softly sighed, "Yes, but that doesn't you can't convince them." Shadowheart stopped and stared at her with wide eyes. Willowbreeze stopped and turned her head. "You can convince them." She repeated, thinking perhaps he didn't understand her.

Shadowheart shook his head slowly and closed his eyes. "No, I don't know how to convince them."

Chapter Twelve

Shadowheart and Willowbreeze finally made it near the Clans. He could smell the river where he met Willowbreeze, Willowpaw at the time. His heart began to race and he stopped. "Are you sure they will accept me? What if they don't?" His voice began to shake with worry.

Willowbreeze turned to Shadowheart, her eyes reflecting the moon's glow. "RiverClan will value your proof that you share with us. Leopardstar is no fish-brain."

Shadowheart took a deep breath, trying to steady the nervous flutter in his chest. The scent of the river brought back memories, both bitter and sweet. "I've been on my own for so long. Clan life is something I've almost forgotten."

Willowbreeze touched her nose to his. "You won't be alone anymore. We'll face this together."

With her comforting presence, they continued toward RiverClan. The moonlit river flowed beside them, making their pelts shimmer from the light.

Once they approached the RiverClan border, a warrior, sleek and silver like the moonlit water, stood guard.

"You know he isn't allowed here in the Clans, Willowbreeze." The she-cat hissed, not taking her gaze off Shadowheart. "He killed Whitestorm, remember?" She added, finally looking over at Willowbreeze.

Willowbreeze looked down at her paws and shuffled them as if she wasn't prepared on what to say or do. Shadowheart took a step forward and puffed out his chest. "I just need to prove that I am not the killer." He pleaded.

Willowbreeze lifted her muzzle and glanced over at Shadowheart,

then back at the gray she-cat. "Please, Mistyfoot. Let him at least speak with Leopardstar." She pleaded.

Mistyfoot stared at them for a good moment before finally responding. "Alright, wait here."

As she trekked away, Willowbreeze turned to Shadowheart. "If she can't persuade Leopardstar, then no one can." She muttered softly to him.

Shadowheart met her with silence. He was just worried on how he would prove to them it wasn't him. But he had nothing. They wouldn't believe him; it would just be empty words to them. Not only to Leopardstar, but all the Clans. He sighed then hung his head low.

Willowbreeze leaned close to him and touched her muzzle with his. "You can do this." She encouraged him.

Shadowheart looked blankly at her, his eyes showing no emotions. It felt like she could read his thoughts. He met her again with silence, unable to think of what to say.

Leopardstar, with her distinctive dappled coat, padded up to them. "Shadowheart, isn't it?" She meowed cooly.

Shadowheart dipped his head in respect. "Yes, I am the one they call Shadowheart."

"And what brings you here to the Clans?" Leopardstar showed no signs of wanting to listen to his story, but she sat down and curled her tail over her front paws and waited in silence for Shadowheart to respond.

Shadowheart mimicked her position, hoping to show her that he was no threat to them. "I am not the cat everyone thinks I am." He began. Leopardstar stayed silent, letting him continue his thoughts. "I did not kill Whitestorm, nor would I want to."

Leopardstar looked down at her paws as if she was carefully thinking on what to say, "Do you have any proof?" She rasped.

Shadowheart shook his head slowly, "No, but I can think of something," he paused, thinking on what to do. Then he thought of Waterlily. "If you can bring Waterlily here, I might be able to convince her to look into StarClan about it."

Leopardstar scoffed and rolled her eyes. *Was it a bad idea?* Shadowheart shuffled his paws awkwardly. "I don't think they would accept me to..."

Leopardstar lifted her tail to silence him. "Mistyfoot," she rasped, turning her head towards the direction of the camp. Mistyfoot sat a few fox-lengths away and pricked her ears as she heard her name. She then got to her paws and padded over to her. "Ask Mudfur if he can bring Waterlily here to speak with Shadowheart." Mistyfoot dipped her head and bounded off towards camp. Leopardstar then called after her, "Don't mention Shadowheart!"

"Got it!" Mistyfoot called back in the far distance.

Leopardstar then her gaze back to the two cats. "Willowbreeze, you vouched for Shadowheart, and I trust your judgment. However, we must ensure the safety of RiverClan. Until we have more clarity on his past, Shadowheart will stay as a prisoner under the watchful eyes of our warriors. We will hold a Clan meeting to discuss this matter further."

Willowbreeze dipped her head in acknowledgment, understanding the necessity of caution. Shadowheart flattened his ears. He didn't like the idea of being a prisoner in RiverClan, but if it meant he would be able to sleep peacefully, it was worth it.

Leopardstar called for a Clan meeting, "Let all cats old enough to swim gather here, to hear my words."

Cats gathered at the heart of their camp. The murmurs of concern echoed through the crowd. Leopardstar addressed the Clan with authority, "This is Shadowheart and he will be staying here. However, until we know more about his past and the accusations against him, he will be under guard."

Mudfur padded out of the medicine den and trekked past them,

heading toward ThunderClan camp. Shadowheart watched, then wondered what Mistyfoot said to bring Waterlily here. He thoughts were then disrupted from Leopardstar's soft rasp once more. "He will not be prodded at, or questioned until he speaks with Waterlily." She finished with a swish of her tail. She turned to Shadowheart and beckoned him to her.

Shadowheart approached Leopardstar, feeling the weight of the Clan's scrutiny upon him. Willowbreeze cast him a reassuring glance, but he couldn't shake the nerves.

As he reached Leopardstar, she spoke with a measured tone, "You will stay in the that den over there for now." She pointed with her muzzle in the direction of the warriors' den. "Our warriors will be watching, but you are not to be mistreated. Waterlily will speak with you when she arrives."

Willowbreeze nodded her head, then led Shadowheart to the prisoner's den, where the tension in the air was palpable. He could feel the eyes of RiverClan warriors fixed on him. Willowbreeze kept her head high and placed her tail over Shadowheart's shoulder in comfort.

The den was simple but well-made, with a moss-lined nest arranged neatly. Shadowheart settled in, his mind racing with thoughts of what awaited him. He laid there in silence and time seemed to pass slowly. Finally he heard soft murmurs from the RiverClan cats. He peered his out of the den, and saw Waterlily padding into camp with Mudfur by her side.

Waterlily looked uneasy as she trekked further into their camp. All eyes turned to her as she approached the den Shadowheart was in. Their gaze locked and Waterlily's eyes were wide with alarm. "Shadowheart?" She gasped.

Chapter Thirteen

Waterlily's ears pricked as she picked up a familiar scent. She followed Mudfur into RiverClan camp, keeping her eyes peeled on the warriors around her. All eyes turned to her and she felt like an outsider.

He led her through the clearing and to an abandoned den where an old friend lay. *Shadowheart.* Her heart began to race. *Has he really came here for refuge, thinking he might be treated as a regular warrior?* Her mind whirled with questions, but she kept silent as she neared Shadowheart.

"Shadowheart." She gasped as she got within ear shot of him. "What are you doing here?" Her voice became cold and heartless.

Shadowheart got to his paws and dipped his head as if he was greeting a friend. "Waterlily, I want to ask you.."

He was cut off by Waterlily's hiss, "Why do you have him here?" She turned to face Leopardstar, who was standing just a few tail-lengths from her. "Don't you know what he has done?"

Leopardstar nodded her head slowly. "I know exactly what he did." She spoke softly. "Perhaps listening to what he has to say may change your mind." She argued with a slight hiss. Her impatience with Waterlily was growing.

Waterlily looked down at her paws in embarrassment, then back up at Shadowheart. "Very well," She muttered, "what is it you wish to speak about it?" Her voice was still cold once she finally spoke towards Shadowheart.

Shadowheart sat down, hoping to imply he was no threat once more. "You once told me you had visions." He began, "correct?" Waterlily nodded, though she was still weary of him. Shadowheart continued, "Did you see the cat in your visions up close?" He chose his words carefully, thinking maybe she only saw the cat from a

distance.

Waterlily nodded her head again. "I did." She sat down, and wrapped her tail over her front paws. "It was you, who I saw." She confessed. "There was no mistaking that." Her heart began to race as the vision she saw became clear in her mind once again. The collar with bones stuck to it made her eyes grow like saucers. "Except you had this collar..." She gulped for air as if she was telling a nightmare kind of story to the kits in the nursery. "It was lined with bones." She looked back up at Shadowheart.

Shadowheart showed no emotions as he spoke, "That is not me. It's another cat." He tried to reassure her, but he had no way of proving it.

"What do you mean, it wasn't you?" Waterlily's eyes narrowed with anger. She knew exactly who she saw. She wouldn't lie.

Shadowheart looked down at his paws shuffled them, then closed his eyes tightly as if he was thinking on what to say next. "It was my father." He confessed.

Gasp of shock rose from the crowd of cats that stood around in camp. Waterlily glanced around her, realizing that almost every warrior in RiverClan was listening to his testimony. Her gaze then locked back to Shadowheart. "Your father?" Her voice was a mere whisper.

Shadowheart nodded. "Yes, he uh..." He paused for a moment, "he looks a lot like me." He confessed, "except he has blue eyes."

Waterlily lifted her muzzle as if she was studying him. Then she softly sighed. "In no way am I convinced, but I will go to the Moonstone tonight and speak with StarClan about this."

Leopardstar rose to her paws. "We will keep him here as prisoner until further notice."

Waterlily dipped her head in acceptance then trekked quickly out of RiverClan camp. As she padded over the bridge, her mind began to swirl with worry. What would she tell Firestar? She trekked faster,

not wanting to think about what he would say.

Once she got back to camp, Firestar was sitting just outside the medicine den as if he was waiting for her return. She padded up to him, her ears flat against her head. "Firestar, I must..."

She was caught off by him as he lifted his tail to silence her. "Spare me the details." He mewed softly, "I do not need to know RiverClan's troubles." He finished, letting his tail drop back down, hitting the small patch of grass that lay below his feet.

"You might want to know this one." She sat down and wrapped her fluffy tail neatly over her front paws.

Firestar mimicked her position and tilted his head to the side, "oh?"

Waterlily took a small breath then began to whisper, hoping no one was within earshot of her, "Shadowheart has returned."

Firestar's eyes grew wide with alarm. "What do you mean?" His whisper was harsh, and it made Waterlily's fur bristle.

"RiverClan is keeping him as a prisoner until they know the truth."

Firestar got to his paws. "We do know the truth!" He hissed, clearly no longer whispering.

Waterlily glanced around the camp. Cats around them pricked their ears and all eyes turned to Firestar as they stopped in their tracks of duty. Waterlily then looked back at Firestar. She narrowed her eyes and flicked her tail. "We can't speak here."

Firestar shook his head. "I believe we all deserve to know." He quickly glanced toward the horizon, then back at Waterlily. "What does RiverClan know that we don't about Shadowheart?" His voice was stern.

Gasp of shock rose through the Clan like a wildfire. Waterlily kept her gaze with Firestar, then dipped her head. "Very well." She muffled under her breath, then headed toward the highrock. Firestar kept silent, watching her heave herself up to speak. Waterlily sat down and waited for the cats to gather around. Her

heart began to race. She was no leader. She had no idea how to calm them down if things got too heated. She looked around the camp. Almost every cat was out now, including the elders and queens with their kits. She took a deep breath, then began to speak. "Shadowheart is back." She began.

Cats who haven't heard the gossip, gasped in shock. Waterlily raised her tail to silence them, just as she had seen Firestar do numerous times before while he was on the highrock. "He resides in RiverClan now. They are holding him hostage until they figure out the truth." She paused for a moment. "They believe that he might not have killed Whitestorm."

"Didn't we have proof?" Mewed Tawnypaw, taking a small step forward.

"We did. Or so we thought." Waterlily could see the fear in almost every cat. She wanted to tell them everything, but she decided to spare the one detail about this mysterious cat being his father. "He claims it was another cat. I had visions of a black cat with a purple collar, lined with bones as if he had killed not one, but many other cats." She paused again, glancing around to see the horror shot through the crowd of cats.

"Do you believe him?" Hissed Dappletail, her eyes narrowed.

"No, but I am going to the Moonstone to speak with StarClan about it. We will have to see what they say." She answered her, shuffling her paws, hoping that was a satisfying answer. Dappletail dipped her head in respect, her eyes still blazing with anger.

Once Waterlily finished, the crowd of cats began to go back to their duties. Frostfur then caught her attention. She sat by the nursery with her head hung low. Waterlily suddenly felt shame wash over her. She was his adopted mother, and she loved him as if he was her own. She couldn't imagine what it felt like to be her. She jumped down from the highrock and padded over to her. "I wish I could change back time, but..."

"Don't worry about it." Hissed Frostfur, cutting Waterlily off, "Just see what StarClan has to say about all of this. We can talk about it

then." Her voice grew softer as she spoke, then she turned and crouched down. "I believe he is good." She murmured, just before disappearing into the nursery.

Chapter Fourteen

Waterlily watched as Frostfur disappeared into the nursery. She couldn't help but feel guilty about her accusation, but she wasn't backing down. She knew that Shadowheart was the cat she saw in her dreams.

She dreaded going to the Moonstone, but if it meant knowing the truth, it would hopefully be worth it. The canopy overhead filtered the sunlight, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. She kept her gaze fixed on the path ahead, her thoughts only weary on what would come of all this.

With each step, Waterlily felt the weight of uncertainty pressing down upon her. The air felt thick as Waterlily neared the Moonstone. She could feel the ancient calling out to her, its presence a tangible force that pulsed in the very air around her. Though she had walked this path many times before, each journey to the Moonstone brought with it a sense of reverence and awe.

Doubt washed over her as she entered the cave. She felt something brush past her and her eyes grew wide. Nothing was around her. She blinked in confusion. Did StarClan know she was coming? She trekked faster inside and stopped in her usual spot where she lay during half-moon. She closed her eyes and touched the wall with her nose. Stars swirled around and the ground changed beneath her paws. She opened her eyes and glanced around. She was not in StarClan. She desperately looked around, in hopes to find where she was, but she felt lost and hopeless the more she lingered there. Her breath began to slow, and she could feel her throat tightening.

"Waterlily?" Meowed a voice from behind her.

Waterlily jumped and quickly whirled around. Though she recognized the voice immediately, it made her freeze in fear as she stared at a tortoiseshell and white she-cat standing before her. She shook her head to clear it. "Spottedleaf." She finally mewed, dipping her head. "Where am I?" She added, looking around Spottedleaf to

see where she had come from.

Spottedleaf licked her paw, then spoke softly. "This is a dark place no cat should ever wander." She licked her chest. "Come on, follow me." She added flicking her tail.

Waterlily followed with her head hung low, wondering exactly what that place was. She didn't dwell on it once she got back to the familiar grounds of StarClan. Her breath became normal once more, and she lifted her head, taking in the sweet scents of herbs around her.

"Shadowheart has come back?" Spottedleaf stopped and turned her head, looking over her shoulder.

Waterlily stopped and flattened her ears. "Yes," She mewed,sitting down and not able to meet Spottedleaf's amber gaze, "I-I don't know what to do." She stuttered, not even knowing what to say.

"Trust him."

Waterlily blinked then looked up at Spottedleaf with wide eyes. "Trust him?"

Spottedleaf solemnly nodded, then wrapped her tail over her front paws as she sat down.

Waterlily shook her head in denial. "How can you trust him? You're the one who gave me the sign," she paused, shuffling her paws, "aren't you?" She could feel herself fading and beginning to wake up. "No, Spottedleaf, please tell me more!" She shouted, but she was only met with silence. She opened her eyes and narrowed them with anger. How could StarClan say that? She stayed crouched down for a good long moment, then finally got to her paws. The journey back to camp felt much longer than normal. The sun's ray shined down onto her back, making her feel hot and sticky once she arrived into ThunderClan territory.

"Waterlily, you've returned!" Purred Cinderpelt as she padded up beside her. "We were beginning to be worried." She admitted.

Waterlily met her with silence, still thinking of what she would tell

Firestar and Leopardstar. Cinderpelt must have noticed she was deep in thought, for she slipped away into the warriors' den as she passed by. Waterlily padded onward towards Firestar's den. She could feel some eyes locked onto her as she came up to the slope and called out his name.

"Waterlily? Is that you?" Firestar called out.

"Yes, it's me," she replied softly, meeting his worried gaze. Settling down in front of him, she took a moment to gather her thoughts, the weight of her news heavy on her heart.

"Well, what news?" Firestar prompted eagerly, his whiskers twitching with anticipation.

Waterlily hesitated for a moment, the words caught in her throat as she struggled to convey the message she had received. Spottedleaf's cryptic words echoed in her mind, as if it was some sort of quest she had to figure out on her own.

"Spottedleaf says to trust him," she finally murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. The words hung in the air between them, laden with uncertainty and possibility.

Firestar's fur bristled with fury. He rose to his paws, his green eyes blazing with anger. "Trust him?" He spat, his voice laced with disbelief. "After all he's done? That traitor doesn't deserve our trust."

Waterlily flinched at the intensity of Firestar's reaction. She knew the pain and loss that Shadowheart's actions had caused, but she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was more to his story than met the eye.

Firestar paced back and forth, his agitation evident in every tense movement. "Leopardstar is not to know." He declared. "We can't afford to let RiverClan harbor a murderer."

Waterlily bit back a protest, the words burning on her tongue. "What should I say then?"

Firestar stopped pacing and looked down at his paws. "I guess that he is not to be trusted." His voice almost sounding like a question.

Waterlily narrowed her eyes. She couldn't lie to RiverClan. But she couldn't argue with Firestar either. She closed her eyes and dipped her head in agreement, "very well." She mewed, then padded over to her den. She laid down and rested her muzzle on her paws. Her eyes stayed open, wide awake. The thought of lying not only to RiverClan, but Shadowheart made her whiskers tremble. She shook her head. "I can't do it." She whispered. She looked up at Firestar's den. "I'm sorry, but I must listen to my heart Firestar."

Chapter Fifteen

Willowbreeze stretched out her limbs and yawned. She was back in RiverClan. It felt like a dream, but it was finally real. Then she softly gasped, remembering that Shadowheart was here too. She quickly rose to her paws and bounded over to where Leopardstar had him staying. Luckily he was always close by.

Her throat began to rumble softly as she approached his den. Mistyfoot sat at the entrance, her blue eyes flashed with fury, then relaxed once she realized it was only Willowbreeze. "You seem a bit on edge." Whispered Willowbreeze.

Mistyfoot narrowed her eyes, "I just have a lot on my mind is all."

Willowbreeze could sense her annoyance and just dipped her head in acknowledgment. "May I see him?" She kept her words calm.

Mistyfoot sat there, staring at nothing for a good moment before finally responding, "Alright, but don't make it for long." She flicked her tail and stood up to step aside.

"Thank you." Purred Willowbreeze. She crouched, then crawled slowly inside through the brambles that hung from the entrance, not really knowing if Shadowheart wanted to see her. She wanted him, but she felt somehow he didn't really want her. She cleared her throat. "Shadowheart." She mewed.

Shadowheart lifted his head from his slumber and his eyes were wide with fear. Then he relaxed his bristled fur when he recognized her scent. "Willowbreeze. I don't..."

"Shhh," She whispered, "you don't need to speak. Things will get better."

"That's a lot of hope." He murmured.

Willowbreeze purred with amusement. "Hope is what keeps us

alive." She touched his nose with her muzzle, then dipped her head. "I only came to see how you were doing. I can't be in here for long." She confessed.

Shadowheart didn't protest. Willowbreeze wondered if he wanted it to be that way. She guessed that he didn't want to show any signs of love when a Clan he doesn't trust is watching his every move. For a moment, Willowbreeze wasn't sure he was going to answer, so she turned to head out of the den. "I am doing as well as I can." He finally mewed just before she left under the brambles.

"I'll come back again sometime tomorrow." Then she crouched down and crawled out. Mistyfoot sat, twitching her tail as if she was impatiently waiting for starlight to come. Willowbreeze brushed past her and searched the camp. She felt relieved to be back home. The scent of the familiar busy bodies made her feel a bit of warmth wash over her.

"Willowbreeze!" Shouted a familiar voice, "I'm glad to see you back."

"Thank you, Shadepelt." Willowbreeze recognized her at once. She was her former mentor. She purred, and padded beside her in a slow pacing manor.

"So you came back with Shadowheart, eh?" She couldn't resist toying with her old apprentice.

Willowbreeze pulled back her ears in embarrassment. "It's complicated," she hissed, playfully.

A smoky black tom padded up to them, "Hey, Leopardstar wants to speak with you, Willowbreeze."

Shadepelt and Willowbreeze exchanged confused glances at one another. Willowbreeze then shrugged and headed towards the leader's den. She wasn't anywhere in her den. Willowbreeze lifted her muzzle and opened her mouth to taste the air. She was gone for a little while. She padded out of the den and searched over the camp, then found her sitting alone by the river. She bounded toward her, and stopped once she was a few fox-lengths away. Leopardstar stared into the distance as if she was deep in thought.

Leopardstar then twitched her ear and turned her head, meeting Willowbreeze's worried glance. "Are you glad to be back?" She asked, turning her head back.

Willowbreeze padded slowly up to her. "I am." She mewed, still weary of what Leopardstar wanted to talk about. "What is it you wish to speak to me about?" She urged, not wanted to stick around for long.

Leopardstar must have sensed her urgency and she twitched her tail with annoyance as she spoke. "I fear that Shadowheart is in danger." She began. Willowbreeze widened her eyes in dismay. *Why would she think that?* As if Leopardstar read her thoughts, she continued, "Firestar is a wise and heartful leader, but he doesn't trust cats who have killed."

Willowbreeze kept still, not knowing what to say. *Why was she telling her all this?* She longed to question her, but thought it be too probing. She didn't get the chance to speak with her leader alone. "Do you believe he has killed?" She finally asked, glancing over at Leopardstar to see how she reacted.

Leopardstar showed no emotions as she spoke. "Shadowheart is much like Tigerstar. It probably worries him." She confessed.

Willowbreeze blinked a few times and looked down at her paws. She had forgotten about Tigerstar. She now was curious and turned to Leopardstar. "What is new about Tigerstar?" She wanted to know what all she had missed. With her being gone, she didn't know much about the gossip that went around the Clans.

Leopardstar sat in silence as if she was lost in thought. At first, Willowbreeze thought maybe she didn't hear her, but she kept silent for a moment longer in case she was processing on what to say. "Tigerstar's ambitions have not waned since your departure," she began, her voice tinged with concern. "If anything, they have grown stronger." She paused, and looked over st Willowbreeze, "That is all you need to know." She then looked back into the distance as if she went back into thought.

Willowbreeze dipped her head in thanks, then turned to head back

to camp. Before she departed, Leopardstar meowed, "Be careful, Willowbreeze. Life will not be the same for you with Shadowheart here."

WIllowbreeze quickly glanced down at her paws, then back up at her leader. She didn't know whether to take that as a good or bad thing. She tried to shrug it off and headed back to camp with her head hung low. Shadepelt made her jump as she neared the warriors' den. "So what did Leopardstar have to say?" She urged, curious on why only she was called upon.

"She just wanted to make sure my duties were met. She doesn't want me lingering around camp all day." She slightly lied, but she knew it would at least satisfy Shadepelt's probing questions. She ducked into the warriors' den and sensed another cat's presence as she entered. Stonefur sat at the back, licking his paw. He stopped and looked up at her as if he could sense some sort of urgency.

"I can do as many patrols as you need me to." She meowed softly.

Stonefur lowered his gaze. Willowbreeze guessed he was thinking on where to place her. She kept silent, and waited patiently. He then finally lifted his gaze back to her, "You can go to tonight's hunting patrol, and then the afternoon patrol with Mistyfoot."

Willowbreeze dipped her head in thanks, then padded back out of the den. She was glad to have something to do. Though the words of Leopardstar kept her mind busy with questions. *Why would life be different with Shadowheart being here?* She shook her head. She had to keep her mind clear if she was to go fishing with a night patrol.

Chapter Sixteen

As the moon rose high in the sky, casting a silvery glow over the forest, Waterlily's thoughts were consumed by Firestar's words. She paced restlessly in the clearing of her den. It haunted her like it was all just a bad nightmare.

With a heavy sigh, Waterlily turned her attention to the neatly organized rows of herbs that lined the walls of her den. The familiar scent of chamomile filled the air, a comforting presence amidst the turmoil of her thoughts.

She sighed again, and decided it was to be done. She had to tell Leopardstar about what StarClan told her. She peeked outside of her den. She saw only Sandstorm sitting at the edge, watching over the Clan as they slept. She thought about sneaking past her, but knew she would get caught anyways. She trekked over to Sandstorm and stopped just a few tail-lengths from her.

"Are you okay?" Mewed Sandstorm.

Waterlily couldn't help but wonder if she showed too much emotions as she headed towards her. She nodded her head, "Yes I'm fine, thanks." She meowed coolly, trying to sound as normal as possible. "I'm heading out to speak with Leopardstar." She added with a rather hoarse mew.

"Good luck."

Waterlily dipped her head, then bounded off up the ravine, and out the gorse tunnel. Tall trees loomed overhead, their branches reaching toward StarClan like outstretched paws, while the underbrush rustled softly. The air was cool and crisp, carrying with it the earthy scent of damp soil and decaying leaves. Shafts of moonlight pierced through the dense foliage, illuminating patches of the forest floor in a silvery glow.

She felt at ease as she trekked on through the forest. As she traveled

deeper, the terrain gradually shifted, giving way to marshy wetlands and tangled thickets of reeds. The air grew heavy with the scent of water, mingling with the earthy aroma of the forest. She heard a crack coming from somewhere ahead of her. She pricked her ears in alarm. A small white creature darted and disappeared into the undergrowth a few fox-lengths away. She sighed with relief, thinking it may have been a RiverClan cat ready to attack her. Though she knew they probably wouldn't since she is a medicine cat, she was still weary of how Leopardstar may take a ThunderClan cat wondering into her territory.

She pressed on and finally padded into familiar grounds of RiverClan. As Waterlily approached RiverClan's territory under the cover of night, she moved with cautious steps, mindful of the slumbering cats who rested within their dens. The camp was shrouded in silence, broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves or the soft murmur of the river nearby. She headed inside camp, glancing around for a patrol. But they were unguarded. She began to feel fear and her heart raced with worry.

"Waterlily?" Mewed a familiar voice.

"Willowbreeze, is Leopardstar in her den?" She sounded startled, but quickly shook her head as if to clear it.

"Of course. This way." She pointed with her tail and took the lead. Waterlily followed her in silence, hoping she wouldn't ask any questions as to why she was here. She wanted to speak with Leopardstar about it first. They passed by Mistyfoot who sat watching Shadowheart. She dipped her head as Waterlily passed by. She slightly nodded her head in return, then kept her gaze looking forward.

"She's up there. She is probably sleeping, so speak softly to not startle her." Willowbreeze urged, then sat down as if she was going to wait for Waterlily's return.

Waterlily dipped her head in thanks then padded inside, flattening her ears as she scanned the den. Moss lined the den walls, making the air feel moist and damp. "Leopardstar, it's Waterlily." She mewed a little over a whisper.

Leopardstar stirred at the sound of Waterlily's voice, lifting her head from her nest with a drowsy blink. "Waterlily?" she murmured, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Yes," Waterlily replied, her tone urgent yet respectful. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but this couldn't wait much longer."

Leopardstar's eyes widened slightly, the remainder of sleep fading from her gaze as she focused on the medicine cat before her. "And what news may that be?" she asked, her voice growing more alert with each passing moment.

"I went to StarClan," She began, "and they told me to trust Shadowheart."

"Trust him?" Leopardstar repeated, a note of skepticism creeping into her voice. "After everything that has transpired?"

"I know, I thought the same, but I think StarClan might be right." She paused for a moment. "Firestar believes otherwise." She added, looking down at her paws.

"Firestar is only afraid of what might happen. He already fears Tigerstar too much." Her voice sounding more annoyed than understanding.

Waterlily narrowed her eyes. "He has a right to be weary!" Waterlily spat, then quickly shook her head, realizing Leopardstar was nothing like her leader when it came to going against what they say. "I mean, I can understand both sides." She quickly added. "What are your thoughts on this?"

Leopardstar stared at her paws for a what seemed like moons then finally lifted her muzzle and met Waterlily's amber gaze, "I do not know what StarClan has in store, but we will respect their words. If Firestar wishes to not even see him, he can reside here for the time being. He might be useful to our Clan." She admitted with a low hoarse mew.

Waterlily dipped her head in agreement then turned to head out of the den. Then she turned her head to look over her shoulders back

to Leopardstar. "Should Firestar know this?" She was curious on what Leopardstar would say.

Leopardstar shrugged her shoulders. "Say whatever you think is best. You know him better than I do."

Waterlily then knew that Leopardstar really had no idea on how Firestar might react to this. *Best to keep it quiet.* She thought to herself then bounded out of the den. She slipped through RiverClan territory and headed home with a sudden urgency.

She reached ThunderClan camp and found Firestar emerging from his den. She raced over to him and breathed heavily as she approached him. "Firestar," She panted, "I spoke with Leopardstar."

Firestar's ears pricked and his nose twitched with curiosity. "Well?"

Waterlily hesitated, her mind racing as she grappled with her decision. She knew she couldn't tell Firestar the truth—that she had told Leopardstar to trust Shadowheart. It would only lead to more conflict and mistrust between the Clans. "I told her that Shadowheart is not to be trusted." She lied.

Firestar sat silently and his whiskers trembled. "And what did she say?" He urged her to keep going.

"Uh.. She's going to keep him as hostage for a while longer to see if he comes up with some proof." She hoped that was enough to satisfy him.

Firestar narrowed his eyes in anger. He looked at Waterlily with a fierce gaze that made her whole body tremble. He looked as if he was going to catch her lying, but he then looked down at his paws and flattened his ears against his head. "Death will be upon them if they keep him for long."

Chapter Seventeen

The night air was thick with tension as Shadowheart lay restless in his makeshift nest. Despite the exhaustion that weighed heavily on his limbs, sleep eluded him, his mind consumed by thoughts of the accusations that had been leveled against him. How could he prove his innocence when all evidence seemed to point to his guilt?

The memory of Whitestorm's lifeless body flashed before his eyes, sending a shiver down his spine. He had admired the ThunderClan deputy. But then his mind focused on how he would prove to the Clans that he was not the one who had killed Whitestorm, but he could think of nothing. Scourge wouldn't come running in to save him, though he was his father. So that was out of the question.

He heard footsteps approaching and saw a faint shadow with a hint of brown and white patches. Then he could see the she-cat almost clearly. It was Waterlily. He could now smell her sweet scent of herbs. He pricked his ears and watched as she padded up into Leopardstar's den. Mistyfoot sat at the front of his den. She pricked her ears as well, and he could sense a bit of fear as she dipped her head. *Did Waterlily show any signs of distrust?* His heart began to pound in his chest faster, making him feel uneasy.

"I think it might be good news." Whispered Mistyfoot, shifting her gaze over to Shadowheart for just a mere second.

Shadowheart tensed his muscles. He couldn't help but feel like she was being sarcastic. "Why is that?" he ventured, his voice a whisper as he edged closer to the den entrance.

Mistyfoot remained still, her gaze fixed on some unseen point in the distance, lost in thought. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely more than a murmur. Shadowheart strained his ears to catch every word. "I believe you," her tone was steady. "You are no killer, but Tigerstar is," she finished, with a hint of anger.

Shadowheart's widened his eyes in disbelief. To have someone from

another Clan, especially a high-ranking cat like Mistyfoot, vouch for him was beyond what he had hoped for. "Thank you," he murmured, gratitude lacing his words. "But why do you believe me? And why now?"

Mistyfoot's gaze softened, and she turned to meet his eyes. "I've seen enough to know." She replied, her voice firm. "And I've seen how you carry yourself, how you interact with others. You may have a past, but you don't strike me as a cold-blooded killer."

Shadowheart nodded slowly, his heart swelling with gratitude. He did not expect to hear that from a well respected cat. "Thank you." He rasped.

"Don't let the compliment go to your head," she softly hissed, "you're still a prisoner until further notice."

Shadowheart looked down at his paws, not really wanting to hear that kind of thing. Before he could respond, Waterlily padded past Mistyfoot, her head kept low and looking straight ahead.

Shadowheart glanced over at Mistyfoot with concern beaming in his eyes. Mistyfoot followed Shadowheart's gaze, her expression unreadable as she watched Waterlily pass by. Shadowheart could sense the tension radiating from Mistyfoot, and he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her.

"That didn't look too promising." Shadowheart mewed softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Mistyfoot's gaze lingered on Waterlily for a moment longer before she turned back to Shadowheart, her eyes clouded with uncertainty. "I'm not sure," she admitted, her voice tinged with concern. "She hasn't said a word to me." She finished with a slight hiss in her voice, clearly just as annoyed as he was.

Leopardstar approached the den with a sense of admiration. Shadowheart's attention shifted from Waterlily's passing to the clan leader's presence. He straightened up slightly, a mix of wariness and curiosity glowing in his eyes. She sat just a few tail-lengths from Mistyfoot and kept her gaze fixed on her as she spoke. "I'll be

calling a meeting here shortly," she rasped, slowly. "You are free to join once I do." Her gaze swept over Mistyfoot and locked onto Shadowheart.

Shadowheart tensed. Leopardstar's gaze made him feel restless, but pride washed over him as he heard her words. "Thank you." He purred, dipping his head.

Leopardstar then trotted off towards the highrock which was surrounded with a small stream of water. She puffed out her chest and stood tall as she said the ancient words before her. "Let all those old enough to swim, gather here to hear to my words."

Shadowheart heard her call and pricked his ears. He had no idea what would come of this. He wanted to be apart of the Clans once more, but it worried him that he would be a prisoner forever. He padded out of the den and looked around, thinking maybe the cats wouldn't accept him, but no one noticed him. All eyes were locked onto Leopardstar. He swiped his gaze over the Clan. RiverClan was smaller than he had expected. He remembered seeing almost every cat at the Gatherings. Only a few he didn't recognize, assuming they were either elders or kits at the time.

Shadowheart sat in the back, not wanting to cause any trouble. He wrapped his tail over his front paws and watched as Leopardstar began to speak again. "Waterlily has come back with some news from StarClan." Her voice rang through the crowd of cats. Their eyes wide with curiosity. She continued, her gaze stopping on Shadowheart. "Shadowheart was left a rogue because of something he was blamed for." Shadowheart was relieved she didn't spill out all of the details. "But now, he is one of us."

Shadowheart widened his eyes. Did he hear that right? He shook his head to clear it and blinked a few times. All eyes turned to him. He flattened his ears and wanted to bristle his fur in fury, but he kept his cool. "He is one of us." Repeated Leopardstar, with a bit more stern in her mew.

"Shadowheart! Shadowheart!"

Shadowheart recognized that meow immediately. It was

Willowbreeze. He purred and swept his gaze over the clan until he saw her through the crowd of cats.

"Shadowheart! Shadowheart!" Shouted the RiverClan cats. Willowbreeze being the loudest of all.

Leopardstar jumped down from the highrock and padded over to Shadowheart. He could feel his whiskers trembling with fear. "Do you promise to stay loyal to RiverClan?"

Shadowheart met her amber eyes. She showed no signs of doubt, but he guessed it must be custom to make sure he wasn't going to betray them. "I do." He bowed his head. He then wondered if it was like the warrior naming ceremony, but Leopardstar dipped her head, then padded back to the front of the crowd of cats. "One last thing," she rasped, "Firestar is not to know."

Chapter Eighteen

Willowbreeze gazed out across the moonlit river, her thoughts swirling like the water below. Ever since Shadowheart had been accepted into RiverClan, her emotions had been a mix of hope, and fear at the same time. As she watched the moon's reflection dance on the surface of the water, she couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in her heart. She loved him, but something felt wrong.

"Willowbreeze, are you alright?" A black tom asked, padding up to her with almost silent pads.

Willowbreeze flinched from the sudden mew that cut through her thoughts. She jerked her head, bristled her fur and let out a small hiss. "Oh, it's you." She hissed a little less annoyed trying to hide her embarrassment. "You scared me, Shadowheart."

Shadowheart purred with amusement as he neared her and sat just a tail-length beside her. He stared out into the distance before finally saying something. "I just saw you all alone and thought you could use a friend."

Willowbreeze's fur softened as she turned her gaze to Shadowheart, her heart warming at his words. "Thank you," she murmured, dipping her head in gratitude. Despite the doubts that plagued her mind, she couldn't deny the comfort she found in his presence.

Shadowheart's green eyes softened as he looked at her, a hint of concern flickering in their depths. "Is something bothering you?" He asked gently, his voice filled with genuine concern.

Willowbreeze hesitated, unsure whether to confide in him. But the look of sincerity in Shadowheart's eyes melted away her reservations, and she found herself opening up to him for the first time in moons. "I can't shake this feeling of unease," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "Ever since you joined RiverClan, things have felt... different." She remembered the words Leopardstar

had told her. *Life will not be the same for you with Shadowheart here.*

Shadowheart nodded in understanding. He padded closer to her, and pressed himself against her soft flank, offering silent support as they watched the river side by side. For the first time, her thoughts left her momentarily and she felt like they were finally together. She closed her eyes let her mind wander as she felt his close to her.

A distant smell lingered in the air. Shadowheart opened his eyes and looked around. He could see or hear anything. Not a moment later, the sound of rustling leaves caught his attention and he quickly crouched down and laid his ears flat. Willowbreeze followed suit and they both peered through some tall grass.

A dark figure emerged from the shadows, and as it stepped into the moonlight, Willowbreeze gasped. Shadowheart glanced at her with confusion. "What's wrong?" He whispered.

"Tigerstar is here." She watched as he headed into camp with a sense of urgency. She straightened herself up and followed in soon after him.

Shadowheart blinked in confusion again. "Why is here?" He whispered, racing after her.

"Only StarClan knows." She whispered with a shrug.

Cats crowded around the highledge as Tigerstar heaved himself up. Shadowheart glanced around. No one else seemed confused as to why he just waltzed into RiverClan acting like he was their leader. Leopardstar padded up behind him. She whispered something Shadowheart couldn't hear. Tigerstar then cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Cats of RiverClan," Tigerstar's voice rang throughout the crowd of cats. "I have come to discuss matters of great importance."

Shadowheart's ears twitched as he leaned forward slightly, his gaze fixed on Tigerstar. He remembered him, but only just. He was just a kit when Tigerstar was banned from ThunderClan. All the stories he heard, made him feel uneasy.

"As many of you know," Tigerstar continued, his eyes sweeping over the assembled cats, "ThunderClan and WindClan are still not working with us, and I gave Firestar plenty of time to reconsider.

A low growl rippled through the Clan, a collective expression of anger and defiance. Shadowheart felt a shiver run down his spine. Was he planning to attack ThunderClan? The thought of having to fight made his heart race with fear.

"We will not stand by while our enemies plot against us, as I'm sure that is what they're doing," Tigerstar declared, his voice ringing with authority. "We will strike first and show them the strength of RiverClan and ShadowClan together as TigerClan."

A chorus of fierce yowls rose up in agreement, the cats of RiverClan ready to fight. As Tigerstar outlined the plan for battle, Shadowheart listened intently, committing every detail to memory. He wanted to tell Waterlily of his plan.

The meeting was adjourned and Shadowheart turned to Willowbreeze. They exchanged a couple of blank looks at one another, but Shadowheart wasn't sure she would side with him to tell Waterlily of Tigerstar's plan.

"Willowbreeze," he whispered tentatively, "I think we should tell Waterlily about Tigerstar's plan. She deserves to be informed, especially considering the danger it poses to ThunderClan."

Willowbreeze's expression was unreadable as she considered his words. Shadowheart held his breath, waiting for her response. He knew that their relationship had been strained at times, but he hoped that she would see the importance of honesty and transparency in this situation. Willowbreeze looked down at her paws, then back up Shadowheart. "I guess it's only fair because you came from ThunderClan that you want to warn them." She mewed softly once everyone was out of ear shot.

Shadowheart felt a wave of relief wash over him. She was on his side after all. "Thank you, Willowbreeze." She purred.

"But," she meowed, looking into the distance, "we would have to

play it in a way that Firestar doesn't suspect that you have anything to do with it. He still thinks you're a prisoner."

Shadowheart opened his jaws to reply, but he saw Tigerstar coming up to the two of them. Willowbreeze seemed to have noticed his sudden change in emotion and she turned to face Tigerstar as he approached them.

"You are new here." He meowed, coolly, glancing over at Shadowheart.

"Oh, I'm Shadowheart." He mewed, dipping his head in respect to the old leader.

"You seem familiar." He slightly narrowed his eyes.

Shadowheart tensed. Did he remember the time Waterlily brought him into the Clan? Shadowheart shrugged, trying to hide his unease. "I was just a kit when you became leader." It was half true.

Tigerstar blinked a few times in silence, then dipped his head. "I believe I remember you." Then he padded away toward Leopardstar.

Shadowheart took a deep breath in relief, though he still had no idea what he meant when he said, *I remember you*.

Chapter Nineteen

Waterlily carefully sorted through bundles of herbs, her focus intent. "One, two, three..." She paused and pricked her ears. The rhythmic rustle of leaves outside the den drew her attention. A fishy scent filled her nostrils. She bristled her fur, but quickly flattened again once the scent drew closer. "Mudfur, what brings you here?" Waterlily inquired, her curiosity piqued by the unexpected visit.

Mudfur's expression was grave as he padded closer, his gaze meeting hers. "Waterlily, I bring troubling news," he began, his voice tinged with concern. "Tigerstar has planned to launch an attack on ThunderClan and WindClan."

"Since when are you on our side?" She narrowed her eyes, thinking this could be an ambush by them. Mudfur was RiverClan afterall. She knew Tigerstar was working with Leopardstar.

Mudfur flinched from her words. "We may be in different Clans, but we are indeed friends." He hissed bitterly.

Waterlily pushed back her ears in embarrassment. She should have known that. Feeling rather sorry for actions she lowered her head in shame. "Sorry, I... I just have a lot on my mind." She confessed. "What is Tigerstar planning?"

"He hasn't told us everything, but I assume he plans something at the next Gathering. I can let you know as soon as I hear something." He whispered, glancing back over his shoulder, making sure no one was within ear shot.

"Thank you. I'll cease to tell anyone until we know for sure." She whispered back, agreeing this might just work. Though she had doubts, she knew medicine cats were generally closer in friendship than any other.

Mudfur dipped his head in agreement then padded out of the den. The Gathering was not far off. Just a few more sunrises. Waterlily's

heart began to race. She narrowed her eyes, and she felt like the sun burned her fur for just a moment. She closed her eyes and tried to keep herself relaxed, but it burned her once more.

"Waterlily, are you alright?" A voiced pierced through her thoughts and she blinked a few times before realizing it was Firestar who stood in front of her. His eyes looked worried as he spoke again, "Waterlily what happened?"

"I uh... saw the future." She rasped, unable to think on the right words. She blinked back to the real world and she felt more confused than ever.

"You *saw* the future?" He repeated her words with more worry than question.

"I haven't been able to do that since Bluestar..." She paused and looked over him with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"You could see the future? Is that why you knew so much about the Clans?" He asked, curious, yet he was still careful with his words.

Waterlily nodded, "Yes," she mewed softly, almost in a whisper, "Featherwhisker, Spottedleaf's mentor, spoke to me often in my dreams." She confessed.

Firestar's eyes widened with astonishment, his tail flicking nervously behind him. "Featherwhisker? But he's been gone for seasons. How is that possible?"

Waterlily sighed, feeling the weight of her secret pressing down on her. "I don't know, Firestar. All I know is that he appeared to me in my dreams, guiding me, sharing his wisdom. He told me things, warned me of dangers."

Firestar nodded slowly, his expression grave. "And what did he tell you about now? About Shadowheart?"

Waterlily hesitated, torn between her loyalty to her Clan and her duty to StarClan, though she was beginning to have doubts. "I don't quite understand it yet." She spoke slowly, not wanting to sound too distracted by her own thoughts. "There was no mention of

Shadowheart." She quickly confessed then bit her tongue before she spat anything else out. Shadowheart must remain a secret.

Firestar dipped his head. "Just let me know once you do figure it out?" He urged. "We need to prepare for a fight if that is what we must do."

Waterlily gave him a quick nod then flicked her tail, hoping he got the message that she wanted to be alone. Firestar nodded then padded back to his den in silence. She sat in her den alone once more. She sighed and let her body collapse to the ground with relief. She couldn't remember the last time she had a vision. It suddenly made her pads feel cold on the ground below her as she thought about Bluestar. She was the reason on why she joined ThunderClan. *Fire alone will save the Clan*. She softly thought to herself. Firestar is to save the Clan now. Without her visions, she suddenly began to feel useless. Like she wasn't needed anymore.

She questioned herself and thought of leaving ThunderClan since she no longer had her visions. She could talk to StarClan, but almost anyone could do that if they wanted to be a medicine cat. The problem was, she had no apprentice. *Cinderpelt was great help, but she is a warrior now.* The more Waterlily thought about it, she knew leaving now would only mean war and Tigerstar ruling all four Clans.

With a heavy heart, Waterlily rose to her paws and padded to the entrance of her den, gazing out into the moonlit clearing. The Gathering loomed on her shoulders. She shuddered at the thought of blood being spilled during a truce. But for now all she could do was wait for Mudfur's return. She just hoped that he would be back before the Gathering though she had doubts of that too.

She laid down, resting her head on her paws and closed her eyes tightly. "Please StarClan, help us." She whispered. "I need you more than I ever did. Why aren't you giving me any more visions of the future?" She was now frustrated. Not only with herself, but with StarClan.

As Waterlily's whispered plea hung in the air, a profound stillness settled over the den, broken only by the soft rustle of leaves

outside. In the silence, she could almost feel the weight of her words echoing through the night, reaching beyond her borders, but StarClan remained silent as if they, too, were holding onto some dark secret.

Chapter Twenty

Shadowheart felt like a shadow among them as if he was destined to be an invisible warrior. The two RiverClan cats leading the way seemed oblivious to his presence, their conversation flowing without any acknowledgment of his existence.

"Did you see the catch Mothpaw made yesterday?" Feathertail meowed, her voice carrying over the rustling of leaves.

"Yeah, she caught a huge fish!" Blackclaw purred after her.

Shadowheart listened in silence, though he wished they would talk about someone he knew. All the names got jumbled in his head and he could barely focus as he continued to follow them down a small terrain. He lifted his muzzle and opened his jaws to taste the air. It was a pungent and foul smell, unlike anything he had encountered in the forest before. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, trying to identify the source of the odor.

"What's that smell?" He finally hissed, laying his ears flat against his head.

"It's the horseplace." Explained Feathertail, glancing over her shoulder as she continued around the fence line for a quick moment. "Just don't get too close. Their feet could kill us in a heartbeat." She added.

Shadowheart slightly widened his eyes in fear and tried not to make his swallowing sound so loud. "Oh, right." He rasped.

"Come on, Shadowheart," Blackclaw halted and teased, his tone laced with amusement. "Don't tell me you're scared of a couple of oversized Twoleg beasts?"

Shadowheart bristled at the taunt, but he forced himself to maintain his cool. "I'm not scared," he retorted, his voice tinged with defiance. "Just cautious."

Feathertail rolled her eyes. "Let's save the banter for later." Her gaze flicked between the two toms. "We've got a border to patrol, remember? We're almost done."

With a grudging nod, Shadowheart fell into step behind his clanmates, the scent of the horseplace fading behind them as they continued their patrol along the WindClan border. Despite Blackclaw's teasing manner, Shadowheart felt a surge of unease as he passed by them, his ears alert. He could hear their soft, short purrs and the occasional stomp of their feet. He couldn't wait to a good distance from them.

As they padded back into camp, the rest of the Clan was heading out for their patrols and hunts. All he wanted to was just to lie down and sleep. Ignoring the curious glances of his Clanmates, he made his way to the prisoner den. He curled up on the cold earth and let his mind wander with questions. Can I pretend to not exist except in RiverClan? He still felt like a shadow as if he was following his father once again.

"Shadowheart," a soft voice broke through his dream.

Pulling him from his thoughts, he turned to see her standing at the entrance of the den. "Willowbreeze," he acknowledged. Relief washed over him at her unexpected visit. "Sorry for the jump, I was just lost in thought."

Willowbreeze sat next to him. "I just wanted to check on you." She meowed softly. "Did you enjoy your uh, "she paused for a moment then continued, "patrol?"

Shadowheart purred with amusement. He knew exactly what she was meant to say. "For a first, it was pretty good." He gently nudged her shoulder with his.

"Sorry, I know you've been on patrols before." She tried to explain.

Shadowheart raised his tail to silence her. "It's alright." He interrupted, "It was a first for on this side of the river." He added with a purr.

Gratitude swelled within her. "Thank you, Shadowheart," she murmured, touched by his compassion. She turned to leave and Shadowheart quickly stepped in front of her.

"Wait, I don't want to lose you." He whispered, his eyes saddened. He wanted to know if she still loved him.

Willowbreeze tilted her head to the side with amusement. "You won't." She purred. "You're stuck with me."

Shadowheart's heart fluttered with relief as a warm sensation spread across his body. "I wouldn't have it any other way." He mewed, his voice tinged with comfort.

Willowbreeze's eyes softened as she gazed at him, a tender expression reflecting her affection. "I care about you, Shadowheart," she murmured, "no matter what challenges lie ahead, we'll face them together."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Thank you." He whispered, his voice filled with gratitude. She then dipped her head and padded out of the den. She stopped in her tracks and looked back at him with confusion. "You're allowed to sleep in the warriors' den, you know?"

Shadowheart shuffled his paws in embarrassment. "Oh right." He mewed with a bit of sarcasm, "I knew that."

Willowbreeze playfully rolled her eyes and flicked her tail. "Come on, you can sleep next to me until we get you some moss."

Shadowheart followed silently and felt a surge of love wash over him. For the first time, he felt like he belonged. Even though the other RiverClan cats don't accept him, he at least had Willowbreeze.

As Shadowheart settled beside Willowbreeze, the familiar scent of her fur enveloped him like a comforting hushed tone. With a soft sigh, he closed his eyes, allowing the rhythmic sound of her breathing to lull him into a peaceful slumber.

He opened his eyes. Lush grass surrounded him, with large trees almost reaching to the silverpelt. Was he in StarClan? He lifted his

muzzle and sniffed the air. He was in ThunderClan again. He searched around, hoping to find some of his old clanmates, but then he remembered how he shouldn't be seen.

"Shadowheart!" Shouted a familiar voice. It was a she-cat. He turned around to face her. She was happy to see him.

"Waterlily." He purred, glad that she was at least happy with him in his dreams. "I'm glad to see you aren't still mad at me." He added, looking down at his paws.

"Why would I be mad?" She tilted her head to the side in confusion.

"Because I did something terrible." He replied, looking back up at her. Why was she confused?

"What terrible thing have you done this time? It can't be any worse than you sneaking out and seeing Willowbreeze." She mewed with a snort and rolled her eyes.

"Oh, wait what?" He shook his head to clear it. He was more confused now. "Where's Whitestorm?"

Waterlily tilted her head to the side. "You're being awfully cryptic." She mumbled. "He's out on patrol. Why?"

He was still alive. He widened his eyes in amazement. He was dreaming of his past. He then suddenly had a longing to be in ThunderClan once more. Though he loved Willowbreeze, he knew he would always be the outsider, no matter how hard he tried.

Chapter Twenty One

Waterlily trembled as she stared up at silverpelt. It was a full moon, which meant the Gathering was tonight. It was not going to be a memorable one. With all the worries that were swirling around in her head, she knew that she should speak with Firestar about it before it was time to leave. It would at least ease her mind a bit.

She headed up to his den and found him sitting just outside, looking out into the distant forests. "Firestar." She softly mewed, careful not to startle him.

"Waterlily," he mewed turning towards her, what's on your mind?"

Waterlily sat across from him, her eyes filled with worry. "What will come of the Gathering?" She finally asked after a few moments of thought.

"I am not sure." He replied with a sigh.

"What about Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw?" She questioned, not sure if she should be wanting him to fight for them or to give them up.

"They will not be going to the Gathering. If he fights us, then that is what we will do."

"Wouldn't that risk our Clan?" She was now more worried than ever.

Firestar shook his head slowly as he spoke, "Not if we take our strongest warriors."

"But Firestar, " she pleaded, "we need some strong warriors to stay back just in case. And we don't have that many that could fight."

Firestar thought for a moment. She was right, but he wanted to make sure Tigerstar couldn't defeat them at Fourtrees. "Who do you suppose should stay back then?" He prompted, looking up at her with round and curious eyes.

"Dustpelt, Graystripe, and Longtail should probably stay behind." She confessed.

"I suppose that's a good idea." He sighed. "Then Sandstorm, Mousefur, Brackenfur, Cloudtail, and Thornclaw will be coming with us to the Gathering."

Waterlily dipped her head in agreement then padded back to her den to prepare for any injuries that may break out during the Gathering.

The cats of ThunderClan gathered at the edge of their territory, anticipation rippling through the group as they prepared to depart for the Gathering. Firestar led the way with a determined stride, then cast a glance over his shoulder. "We don't know what to expect." He began. "Just try not to fight unless we have to."

Sandstorm dipped her head. "We'll follow your lead then."

As Waterlily settled into her spot among the other medicine cats, she couldn't shake the feeling of unease that gnawed at her insides. The Gathering was always a time for talking and mingling among the Clans, but tonight, she couldn't shake the foreboding sense that something wasn't welcome. She exchanged brief nods with the other medicine cats, acknowledging their presence, but her mind was elsewhere. Her thoughts drifted back to her conversation with Firestar earlier.

"We had some cases of whitecough, but nothing too serious. They recovered pretty quickly." Mewed Mudfur, cutting into Waterlily's thoughts.

"Same. I am worried it might get worse when leaf-bare comes around though." Confessed Littlecloud. Waterlily couldn't keep herself focused on the medicine cat's gossip. She quickly turned her gaze toward the high branches where the four leaders sat.

"Let the meeting begin!" Called out Tallstar. He sat down on his haunches and was a couple of whisker lengths taller than Tigerstar.

Waterlily glanced up at Firestar. He seemed rather calm, despite

what all was going through his mind. She didn't want to know what would happen here at the Gathering. As she began thinking of the absolute worst, she caught a glimpse of Tigerstar looking out into the Clan. *Was he searching for Bramblepaw and Tawnypaw?*

"WindClan has sensed ShadowClan scent in our territory." He looked over at Tigerstar and narrowed his eyes. "If it comes to it, I will fight for my territory." He added, growling.

"You fought for once it and failed." Hissed Tigerstar. "Or shall I remind you again what Brokenstar made you do?"

Tallstar shuffled his paws, "No, you don't have to remind me." He answered calmly, though Waterlily could tell that he didn't want to answer that question at all.

Firestar took a step forward and narrowed his green gaze toward Tigerstar, "May I also remind *you*," he hissed, "we drove Brokenstar *out* because of what he did."

Tigerstar couldn't meet Firestar's eyes. Waterlily then knew Firestar was right and he didn't want to admit what he had just said.

"This doesn't solve this issue." Hissed a WindClan warrior from the crowd of cats. "We scented ShadowClan on WindClan territory. We will not back down for a fight."

Tigerstar raised his tail to silence the warrior. Though he wasn't the WindClan leader, the warrior dipped his head and kept silent. Firestar remained where he was and lifted his muzzle to look up at silverpelt. The full moon was still glowing as bright as usual. There was no sign of darkness and that eased his body as he spoke, "I am afraid that too many fights will come of this night." He began, glancing around at every cat. "Fighting tonight about it will not solve anything. Tigerstar, can we please work something..."

Just as Firestar was about to finish, Tigerstar rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Must ThunderClan leaders always break up the fights?"

Firestar kept his gaze fixed on Tigerstar, not wanting himself to be seen as weak. "Yes, because it seems you won't stop yourself from

letting a fight happen during a truce." He reminded him.

Tigerstar opened his jaws to protest, but he knew that Firestar was right. He was ready to fight, even if it was on a night they vowed to not do. It was the only day they had to get along. "Very well." He finally meowed. "You will not see me or my ShadowClan warriors on your border." He confessed.

"Then this meeting is drawn to a close." Firestar called out. He jumped down and met his warriors just off to the side of the hill that led down to the gathering place. He padded over to Waterlily and whispered softly in her ear. "Let's go speak with Tallstar."

Waterlily quickly nodded her head in agreement and trotted over to Tallstar just as ShadowClan was seen heading up the hill and their bodies were just barely seen in the distance. "Tallstar she yowled.

Tallstar stopped in his tracks and turned his head, with a rather surprised look on his face. "What's up?" He asked, his eyes filled with curiosity.

"Let's join forces against Tigerstar." Firestar meowed as he padded toward Tallstar.

Tallstar thought for a moment as if he wasn't sure what to say. "You've said this before." He mewed softly. "How do we go about joining as alliances?"

Firestar sat down and wrapped his tail neatly over his front paws. "We join together as LionClan and we will fight as one to defeat him."

Waterlily mimicked Firestar's position and looked up at silverpelt. *I wonder what Shadowheart will have to say about this*? She thought to herself.

Chapter Twenty Two

Shadowheart padded into the clearing as the RiverClan warriors returned from the Gathering. They seemed on edge and were gossiping amongst themselves. He tried to listen, but there too many side conversations to comprehend just one. Leopardstar heaved himself up onto the highledge. "Let all those old enough o swim gather here to hear my words." She called out.

Shadowheart sat down and wrapped his tail over his front paws, waiting for the others to settle as well. Almost every cat peeked their heads out and headed into the clearing, just as curious as Shadowheart was. Did the Gathering end badly? They did come back rather early.

"I assume you all would like to know what happened at the Gathering." She rasped. "Tigerstar, I believe is planning an attack on ThunderClan and WindClan." She continued, her nose twitching with anticipation. "I don't know when, but we must prepare to fight with him."

Shadowheart gasped as silently as he could. Was Leopardstar being serious? He wanted to say something, but knew it would only lead him to being a prisoner again. Though he still felt as one, he did not want to go back. *Perhaps I can see Waterlily tonight*. He quickly thought to himself.

Leopardstar's gaze swept over the assembly, her eyes sharp and determined. "We will strengthen our patrols and be vigilant for any signs of trouble," she declared, her voice steady despite the urgency of her words. "Mistyfoot, you may lead the night patrol tomorrow. And Stonefur, you will lead the morning patrols. Shadepelt, you will lead the mid-day one." She finished.

Later that night, Shadowheart stealthily made his way toward the warriors' den. He gently nudged Willowbreeze with his nose, careful not to startle her from sleep. "Willowbreeze," he whispered urgently, "I need your help. There's something I must do, but I can't

go alone."

Willowbreeze stirred from her slumber, blinking sleepily as she regarded Shadowheart with curiosity. "What is it?" she murmured sleepliy, her voice tinged with concern.

"Shh..." He whispered, covering her mouth with his tail. "Follow me." He quickly stepped over the still sleeping warriors and padded to the clearing, hoping no one would see or hear them.

Willowbreeze padded up behind him and looked back at the warriors' den, then back at him with wide and concerned eyes. "What in the name of StarClan! What is so important that you had to drag me out here?" She hissed in hushed voice.

"Sorry, I just need to speak with Waterlily. I can't do this alone." He mewed, keeping her gaze.

"Leopardstar will not like you being disloyal to our Clan." She reminded him.

"At this point, I don't care what she thinks. I must at least tell her that Leopardstar and Tigerstar are working together to attack them." He paused for a moment. "I can't just sit here in silence, Willowbreeze. Please, just help me." He pleaded.

Willowbreeze nodded her head silently, though Shadowheart could sense her urge to say no. He dipped his head in return thankful that she did agree to help. He flicked his tail and led the way back to ThunderClan territory. Willowbreeze followed in silence. *Probably not wanting to know what he was up to.* Shadowheart guessed. He neared Sunningrocks and heaved himself onto the first big rock that lay just before the river. "I guess that I should wait here." He meowed, then jumped back down. "I'll be hiding just here." He wiggled himself backwards to get behind the rock.

Willowbreeze rolled her eyes then jumped into the river. Her body swam like a fish and she was on ThunderClan territory in just minutes. *I would drown if I tried that.* He murmured to himself. It seemed like almost an eternity when finally he scented Willowbreeze. Except she didn't have Waterlily with her. At least he

couldn't smell her. "Is Waterlily with you?" He meowed, peering his out from behind the rock. His eyes saddened a bit when he saw that Willowbreeze was alone.

"No, she refuses to come. She didn't say why." She meowed rather harshly as if something had happened that she didn't want to talk about. She kept walking back toward RiverClan territory.

"Oh, okay." He meowed, confused on why she thought he was going to give up. "I'll see you back later." He mewed almost under his breath, though he hoped that she had heard him. He didn't dare look back to check. He raced over to the bridge that connected the river to the two territories, then made his way into the trees leading to ThunderClan camp. If Waterlily didn't want to speak to him, he would go to her himself. He felt furious, and thought it would be easiest to just march in there like he owned the place, but he knew better. He had to sneak in without getting detected.

Finally, he reached the edge of ThunderClan camp, the familiar scents of his former Clanmates filling his nostrils. He crouched low to the ground, his fur bristling with tension as he scanned the area for any signs of patrols or sentries. Finding a momentary opening in ThunderClan's defenses, Shadowheart darted forward like just a shadow creeping with stealth across the lands. The medicine den was just a whisker away when he something scurry behind him. He froze, then slowly looked behind him. He saw only darkness. Was it just his imagination? He shook his head to clear then quickly padded inside the den. "Waterlily, how dare you not to want to talk to me!" He hissed.

Waterlily jumped, clearly startled and her fur bristled almost all over her body. "Shadowheart." She finally breathed, catching her breath. "What are you talking about?"

"Willowbreeze came here and asked for you to come to edge of the ThunderClan territory near Sunningrocks." He quickly defended himself.

"No." Waterlily shook her head. "She did not come here."

Shadowheart widened his eyes. Would she really do that? He shook

his head to clear it and looked at Waterlily with a confused look on his face.

"Sorry." She mewed, sounding sympathetic. "You coming here must be pretty important. What is it? Why have you come?" She meowed, now more urgently.

Shadowheart sat down then drooped himself into a laying position. "Tigerstar and Leopardstar are planning an attack soon. They're working together as TigerClan. I couldn't let you not know." He finished, frantically.

"Firestar is working with Tallstar and they're calling themselves LionClan." She confessed quietly. "I believe it's the prophecy that Firestar saw." She added.

Shadowheart tilted his head and looked at her with curious eyes. It has been a while since he could be himself and talk with Waterlily.

"Four will become two, Lion and Tiger will meet in battle, and blood will rule the forest." She meowed softly, looking into the distance.

Shadowheart widened his eyes. "I know someone who can kill him." He confessed, looking down at his paws. "Scourge, my father. He could kill Tigerstar in one blow."